

ENTERPRISE -



LOG ENTRIES 44

a STAR TREK
fanzine



Hermits of Mesnia	by Vicki Richards	P 3
The Aura Virus	by Kelly Downs	P 15
Coming Back to Jim	by Sharon Stockley	P 15
A Further Piece of the Action	by Therese Holmes	P 16
Sonnet	by Meg Wright	P 35
Roger - Not Roger?	by Meg Wright	P 36
Without You by my Side	by Susan Meek	P 37
Venom	by Ann Freece	P 38
Kolinahr	by Gillian Catchpole	P 55

Illustrations

Ann Humphrey : Cover, P2, 5, 36, 38, 43, 47.
Maria Johnston : P22, 34.

A Scotpress publication.

Editors - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini

Typing - Valerie Piacentini

Proofreading - Sheila Clark

Printing - Janet Quarton & James T.

Collating - Sheila's Chain Gang - Allison Rooney, Lorraine Goodison, Hilde McCabe, Cory King, Frances Abernethy.

Enterprise Log Entries, price £1.15 within the U.K., is put out by Scotpress and is available from

Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages,
Strathmartine,
by Dundee,
Scotland.

Foreign rates - addressed envelope and 2 IRCs for details.

(C) Scotpress. All rights are reserved to the writers and artists. Anyone wishing to reprint any of the material herein is asked to obtain permission in writing first. It is understood that this applies only to original material herein, and that no attempt is made to supercede any rights held by Paramount, NBC, BBC, or any other holders of copyright in STAR TREK material

August 1981 350 copies.

Scotpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton and Shona

Hello, and welcome to Enterprise Log Entries 44, the first issue put out by Scotpress.

And in case you are wondering why we have carried on from issue 44, it is because this is the 44th genzine of short stories by a variety of authors put out by this editorial group. (Each issue of Enterprise Incidents contains stories by only one author.)

Having reached such a high number of issues we were, quite frankly, reluctant to go back to Issue One; in addition, we felt that although we have changed the title slightly, it would give greater continuity to go on from Issue 44.

Like Log Entries, Enterprise - Log Entries will continue to have a bias towards towards stories that show the friendship and understanding between the characters, in particular between Kirk, Spock and McCoy.

Valerie will be editor for Enterprise - Log Entries, and Sheila, editor for all the other zines we put out (Enterprise - Personal Log, Enterprise Incidents, and the various one-story zines), although obviously we'll be working together a lot, discussing submissions, etc. Janet will be continuing to do all the printing, and our four-legged friend Shona, the fourth member of our group, will be continuing to distract us as much as she can ('Why are paying attention to all that paper and to that clicking machine instead of to me?').

We hope to continue our established frequency of publication, with at least one issue of Enterprise Log Entries (plus a one-off) every two months. We do, therefore, still need submissions of fiction, poetry and artwork if we are to accomplish this; we'll be delighted to consider anything you care to send us.

Submissions can be sent to

Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
St. hmartine
By Dundee
Scotland

or

Valerie Piacentini
20 Ardrossan Road
Saltcoats
Ayrshire
Scotland.

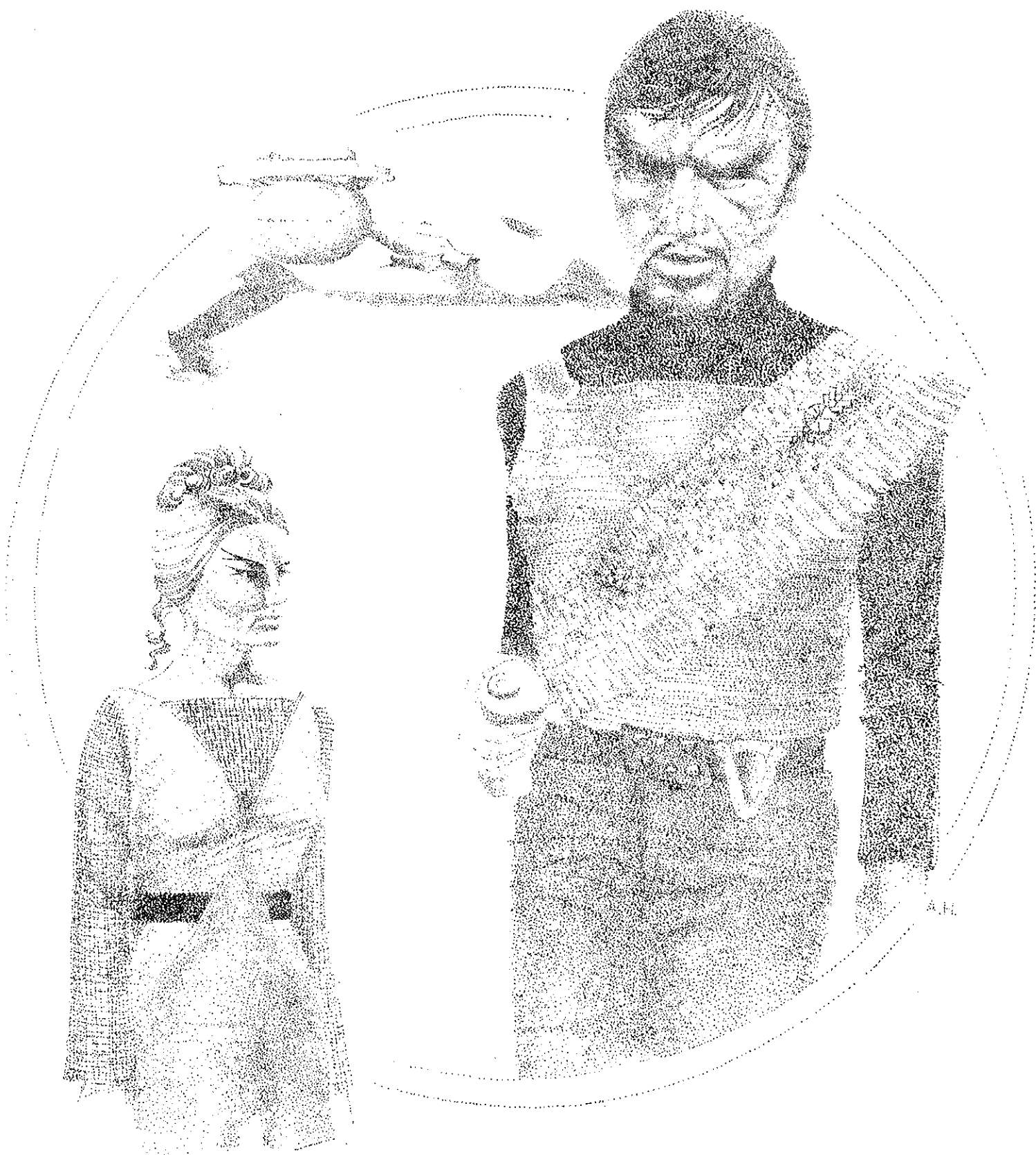
Now that we are putting out zines independently, we feel we can widen the scope of the story policy we operated when our zines were put out by STAG. Any stories that fall outwith the still very general character of Enterprise Log Entries will be assigned to its new companion zine, Enterprise Personal Log. However, we still do not want stories in which one of the major characters dies (to judge from letters of comment this is what most people want), stories which involve explicit sex, or stories solely about ships and characters of the author's own invention. Most people do seem to feel that Star Trek is the Enterprise and her crew - and we'll certainly drink to that!

We are delighted to have in this issue a story by 10 year old Kelly Down and a poem by 8 year old Sharon Stockley; if they can do it, none of you adults have an excuse!

We hope that you will continue to enjoy our zines, and we will be pleased and interested to receive letters of comment.

Valerie

Sheila



THE HERMITS OF MESNIA by Vicki Richards

Spock stood silently behind his Captain, waiting for the decision which he knew Kirk was almost bound to make; the decision to which he would offer logical arguments for its abandonment, and which he also knew would be useless against Jim Kirk's determination. For the last hour the Vulcan had watched as his friend had wrestled with himself over his responsibilities to his crew, to his friends, and most of all to the friend who at that moment needed his help more than any, needed the help of both of them - Dr. Leonard McCoy.

Where McCoy was at that precise moment they did not know, save that he was somewhere on the uncharted planet above which the Enterprise now orbited, its blue-grey mass dominating the main Bridge viewscreen which he and Kirk watched as though the picture could in some impossible way give a clue as to which part of the planet hid their friend.

They did not even know if McCoy was alive, Spock reflected, or if he was, if they could find him; and it seemed only too likely that the doctor had been injured by the transporter malfunction which had occurred at the very moment when McCoy had been beaming down.

But the story was far more complicated than had at first appeared. The Enterprise had been on a routine duty of mapping the unexplored planets in a distant quadrant of the galaxy, and had been contacted by the planet above which they held their present position, the very planet which held the secret of McCoy's whereabouts.

When the planet had contacted the Starship, its rulers had requested that the ship's surgeon beam down and aid them. Mesnia, as the aliens called their world, was in the grip of an epidemic, they had said, and they required the aid of Dr. McCoy in bringing it under control. No doubt people capable of building a Starship would have superior medical knowledge, the Mesnians had reasoned, and since the planet appeared to be far enough advanced for any violation of the Prime Directive to be out of the question, Kirk had readily agreed, and McCoy had gone almost immediately to the transporter room.

But McCoy had been the victim of a badly-timed transporter accident at the worst, and a conspiracy at the best. According to the Mesnians the doctor had never reached the surface, but here there were conflicting reports. Mr. Scott was adamant that McCoy had reached the planet safely, but at that moment when the beaming-down process was almost completed, the Chief Engineer had experienced the sensation of the control of the transporter being snatched away from him, followed instantly by a small local explosion in the transporter console.

The Mesnians had immediately re-contacted the Enterprise and claimed that something must have gone wrong with the transporter process, that McCoy had never arrived.

It was at this point that Kirk and Spock had begun to suspect that the Mesnians were not all they seemed. According to the sensor sweeps, and also to the description of the planet the Mesnians themselves had given, they should not have known what a transporter was; true, they were not primitives, but they were not - or at least they did not appear to be - far enough along the industrial scale even to have invented the internal combustion engine, yet when the Starship had come into orbit around the planet, they had contacted the Enterprise with subspace radio.

Though there was still the possibility that McCoy had been injured by the transporter, Spock had known the Chief Engineer long enough to take notice of everything the Scot said concerning the technical aspects of the Enterprise. No, the Vulcan's logic told him that for some unknown reason the Mesnians had captured McCoy, using a technology they should not have, and were now holding him prisoner.

At least, Spock thought, if that is so we may be able to find him. The

Vulcan could understand the tragic irony if McCoy really had been killed by some malfunction of the transporter which he so disliked. Spock understood that, but he also understood that although Kirk had listened to his reasoning, he could not accept the logic of what Spock said as the Vulcan could. Spock stood behind Kirk as he sat in the command chair, staring at the viewscreen, trying to accept what Spock had said, but not being quite able to put the thought from his mind that McCoy might be dead.

The Mesnians had requested an hour to search for McCoy, but neither Kirk nor Spock believed that search would be successful. When the hour expired Kirk would have to send a search party down, but the Mesnians had made it quite clear that they would only accept one man from the Enterprise on their planet at any one time. And Spock knew that when the time came Kirk would go himself, and would not listen to any reasons he might give against that decision, but would beam down alone to the planet, probably into a trap, or worse.

The hour was almost up. Uhura reported a signal coming in, and then the viewscreen burst into life. Kirk found himself staring at the features of Tellan, one of the Mesnian leaders, and suppressed the desire he felt to threaten the alien.

"So, Mr. Tellan," Kirk said dryly, "You have not found my officer?"

The thin, ghoulisn-looking alien looked rather suspicious, as if Kirk's comment had made him nervous.

"No, Captain Kirk, I am afraid we have not," the alien answered in his strange, high-pitched voice. "Although I assure you the search will be continued."

"Do you wish for another member of the Enterprise's medical department to transport down?" asked Kirk, with forced politeness.

"I do not think anyone but your Ship's Surgeon could have helped us," replied Tellan very quickly, as if that suggestion didn't suit him at all. "And it would be pointless to risk the exposure to the epidemic which would occur if any more of your medical people were to come here. No, Captain Kirk - I suggest that if you wish to come yourself, and tell us about this Federation of yours, then we will undertake to keep you away from all chance of infection, but no other personnel from your ship will be acceptable visitors. The choice is yours, Captain - come yourself, or do not come at all."

"There is still the matter of Dr. McCoy," said Kirk rather sharply. It seemed that Spock's suspicion of a trap was only too well-founded. And it was not as if he had any real choice. At least the outlook for McCoy seemed a little brighter.

"When you arrive here," continued Tellan, "you will be able to see for yourself what trouble we are taking in the search for your doctor. I will see you at the coordinates which you used before."

The screen turned blank, and Uhura reported that the Mesnians themselves had ended the transmission.

Spock sighed inwardly, then began the arguments to which he knew Kirk would not listen. "It is obvious that they wish to imprison you as well, Captain," said the Vulcan. "You cannot deny you realise that. You must not go."

Kirk turned round to face his friend. "You know that I have to, Spock," he said quietly, "although I'm certain it's a trap. But if we're ever going to find out what happened to Bones, I have to go. If you have any suggestions, I'll be glad to hear them."

"I realise that it would be futile to send a Security detail down instead. It is logical to assume that if the Mesnians have, as we suspect, the knowledge to take control of the transporter as it appears they did before,

then they would merely do so again, and would no doubt take the whole Security team prisoner. I understand you feel responsible for the safety of everyone of the Enterprise; but Jim... I could fulfil the task of explaining to the Mesnians about the Federation, if that is in truth what they wish." Even as Spock spoke, he could see determination written all over Jim Kirk's face, and knew he was wasting his breath.

"No, Spock." Kirk was adamant. "They want me to go. They made that quite clear. If you turned up down there and spoiled their plans, they might kill you, if it suited them. They could easily invent another transporter accident."

"There is nothing to prevent them from doing that to you," replied the Vulcan.

"I know," Kirk said. "Mr. Spock - you have command. I am on my way to the transporter room." Kirk stood up and faced his friend. "If I, too, disappear, any decisions after that will be for you to make. I know it is pointless asking you not to risk any danger to yourself - I know you too well, Spock. But don't do anything that might put the ship at risk. I know you'll obey that order, anyway."

With a slight smile to soften his words, Kirk walked briskly to the turbo-lift and left the Bridge. Spock sat down in the command chair and waited for the transporter room to communicate. Then he stood up again and began to walk towards the turbo-lift doors. "Lt. Uhura - inform the transporter room that I am on my way there. Request that the Captain should not leave until I arrive. Mr. Sulu, you have the con."

Spock had decided that if he was in command, then the time had come for him to make a command decision.

Spock arrived in the transporter room to find an impatient Kirk leaning on the transporter console talking to the Chief Engineer.

"What's all this about, Spock?" said Kirk. "I hope you haven't delayed me just to hear another argument as to why I shouldn't go."

"No at all, Captain," answered Spock innocently. "It merely occurred to me that I should operate the transporter controls myself. Though Mr. Scott has given me a detailed account of what happened last time, if the same event should re-occur, I would have a clearer idea of what is actually happening, and therefore of its possible remedy." Though Spock's reasoning was as logical as always, he had tactfully not mentioned that one of the main reasons for his appearance in the transporter room was because he felt Kirk would be safer if he, not Scotty, worked the controls.

"All right, Spock - I see your point," said Kirk in a tone which told the Vulcan that he saw only too well.

Kirk took his position on the transporter platform and gave the order to energise.

Definitely Spock moved the controls, and the transporter effect began. Kirk disappeared from view. All appeared to be functioning normally, and the Vulcan began to think that the Mesnians were going to allow the Captain to beam down unhindered. But just as the beaming-down process was being completed,



it happened. The very same thing which Scotty had so accurately described as having happened when the attempt to beam down McCoy had been in progress. Spock had the impression of a surge of power, then of the control of the transporter being snatched away from him. But to Spock there was no doubt as to Kirk's safety; he knew that Kirk had been beamed down successfully, but that the Mesnians had used some powerful device to take control of the transporter process, cleverly giving the impression of a transporter malfunction in doing so. But not clever enough to fool Spock.

So now Jim and McCoy are both prisoners, thought Spock, and began to decide what the next logical action should be.

"Mr. Scott," said Spock, having reached an immediate conclusion, "I must go after the Captain. It is obvious that he has been taken prisoner also."

"But Mr. Spock!" interrupted Scotty. "Yon Mesnians'll only do the same to you!"

"Not if I beam down immediately, and to different coordinates," answered Spock. "The Mesnians will not expect us to make another attempt so soon. In all probability they do not realise that we suspect them; they will no doubt believe that we are at this moment checking the transporter for faults. If I beam down now, the chances of my being discovered will be greatly reduced."

"Aye, but if they have the knowhow to whisk someone away from our transporter, then surely they'll be able to detect someone else beaming down," Scotty protested. The Chief Engineer had the feeling that he was in for another spell of command. He was right.

"I agree," said Spock, "but I have no alternative." He walked over and stepped up onto the transporter platform, having picked up the phaser and tricorder which he had had the foresight to bring with him.

"It's verra risky," muttered Scotty, shaking his head.

"Admittedly, Mr. Scott," said the Vulcan, "but if we are to free Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy it may be our only chance. You are in command, Mr. Scott. In the event that I should be captured, you are to set course for the nearest Starbase, Starbase XII, and report to Starfleet Command for reinforcements. Now, Mr. Scott, please energise."

Without further ado Scotty set the transporter in motion, and Spock dissolved in a shimmering mass of energy. As he watched his First Officer go, the Scot sighed to himself; another spell in the centre seat was not exactly something he looked forward to.

Spock materialised in a large underground chamber which the Enterprise sensors had detected. The Mesnians lived mainly underground, for the climatic conditions on the surface of their world were not conducive to healthy living. As soon as the transporter process was complete, Spock quickly turned in a full circle, checking with his tricorder that there were no life forms in the immediate vicinity, that his arrival had gone as unnoticed as he had hoped. It had. His tricorder told him that he was alone.

Fortunately the chamber which he had chosen to beam down into was a storage chamber, infrequently visited, the perfect place for him to conceal himself.

Though the problem of arriving on Mesnia had been solved, there still remained the greater problem of locating and rescuing his friends. Using his knowledge of the general layout of the underground world of the Mesnians gained from the Enterprise's sensors, Spock began to make his way towards the area where Kirk and McCoy had beamed down.

The underground passageways became more populated the nearer he went to the coordinates Kirk and McCoy had used; it was apparent to the Vulcan that he

was moving from the outer, lesser-used parts of an underground city into the far busier central areas, with the chances of his being discovered increasing with every step he took.

Yet with his Vulcan hearing, and with his tricorder, he managed to avoid capture. Though as he came to the central area of the city it became more difficult, still Spock was able to hide when Mesnians were milling about, and to move in the ever-shortening intervals when the corridors were empty.

As Spock moved through the city the ever-observant Vulcan noticed several things about Mesnian society. From the variety of machines in the city, it was obvious that this was a highly-mechanised society; Spock formed the opinion that most of the functions of the city, especially the life-support systems, were controlled from some central nexus, undoubtedly a computer complex. Yet to Spock it seemed incongruous; the Mesnians he saw in the corridors gave him the impression that they were indeed as Tellan had first represented his people to the Enterprise, that they were not very far along the industrial scale, and were in fact totally unable to comprehend the workings of the vast city in which they lived. They seemed merely to go about their everyday lives accepting, but not understanding, the machines around them, rather as a child would accept that a turbo-lift would obey a voice command without understanding how.

Also, Spock's tricorder indicated that the city's machines were all of a great age; everything, including the walls and ceilings, had been constructed many centuries ago, and there were no signs of any recent repairs or additions anywhere. To Spock, the paradox could have only one logical meaning, that the city had been built by the distant ancestors of the present-day Mesnians, who through some unexplained evolution no longer possessed the knowledge with which their world underground had been constructed.

Yet Spock knew that they were all highly intelligent. He realised that in some way he was receiving an impression that was partially telepathic, and he knew that the only minds he could be receiving a message of that kind from were the minds of the Mesnians themselves.

Yet the Enterprise crew had not been led to believe that the Mesnians had any telepathic abilities; but it was a fact that Tellan and the other rulers had misled them on several counts. And there was an observation which Spock had made while dodging the milling humanoids - not one of them spoke to another, at least not orally. That pointed to telepathic communication between the Mesnians, even though Tellan had spoken to the Enterprise through subspace communications. Yet another fact that didn't relate properly. Spock knew that it would be interesting to discover how this society worked, but that would have to wait until he had completed his more pressing mission, that of rescuing his friends.

As he went on Spock could only speculate on the reason for the Mesnians' abduction of Kirk and McCoy. It was of course possible that they did not fully understand the Starship's capabilities, and had captured the two Enterprise officers with the purpose of holding them to ransom. That, however, seemed unlikely, for no ransom demand had been received by the Starship, and the Mesnians seemed to be going to great lengths to deny that Kirk and McCoy were on their planet at all. The only logical answer was that the Mesnians required his friends' abilities for some reason, and did not intend to allow them to leave the planet. Yet if it was McCoy's medical knowledge they wanted, as they had first stated, then they could have had that merely by asking, as they had seen.

And if medical knowledge was what they sought, what purpose could they have for holding a Starship Captain? No, the reason for his friends' capture would have to remain an enigma for the present, but Spock told himself that the Mesnians would not have gone to such great lengths if they had meant to harm either of them. Unfortunately, Spock was beginning to suspect that the native population of the planet was not particularly logical.

As he neared the most central area of the city, Spock began to pick up

Human life-form readings on his tricorder. They could only be Kirk and McCoy. Spock adjusted his direction accordingly.

Twice he was almost discovered, but still he managed to avoid capture. Soon it became apparent that he was entering an area of the city where prisoners were kept; it was obviously a penal area of some kind. So Jim and McCoy were prisoners. Yet he walked into that area unchallenged. Cell-like rooms lined the walls of the corridors, but no guards were to be seen. Not that any were needed; the prisoners housed in the cells were fed and monitored by the elaborate computer system which seemed to run almost every aspect of the Mesnians' daily life. Spock's tricorder told him further that the doors of the cells were sealed with a force-field operating separately outside each door. The efficiency of the computer system was such that guards would be unnecessary.

It seemed that a great many of the cells were empty, however. That would make Spock's search a little easier. One of the Human life-form readings was coming from close by, but the other was still some distance away. Spock carefully followed the tricorder readings to the closest, and found himself standing outside one of the cells. There was a small transparent panel in the heavy-looking door, and through it Spock was able to see the occupant without getting too close to the force-field.

The occupant of the cell was McCoy. He lay on a narrow bunk with his eyes closed. His face was very white, and Spock didn't think he looked at all well. The sooner he got him out of there the better. In a voice as loud as he dared use without attracting unwanted attention, Spock called through the door.

"Doctor McCoy - wake up!"

McCoy's eyes twitched, but he did not open them.

"Doctor - are you all right?" Spock tried again, a little louder.

This time McCoy did open his eyes, and sat up, slowly, carefully, as if moving too quickly caused him pain.

"Spock?"

"Yes, Doctor, it is I," answered Spock, relieved. "Are you in pain?"

McCoy grimaced. "The Mesnians have a little device not too much different from the Klingon mind-sifter - but it causes pain to the body as well as to the mind. Not at all pleasant. Fortunately, it doesn't seem to have had any permanent effects. And I'll feel a lot better when you get me out of here, Spock."

"I shall attempt to release you in a moment," said Spock. "Have you seen the Captain?"

"Jim? They've got him too?"

"Yes. They tried to explain his disappearance as a 'transporter malfunction', as they did yours." Spock's voice betrayed nothing, but even through the door McCoy could sense the Vulcan's concern.

"I'm glad you didn't fall for that little story," said McCoy wryly. "But Spock... if they've got Jim, they're probably interrogating him like they did me."

"Then, Doctor, as soon as I have released you we must attempt to rescue him," said Spock. Although McCoy had said that the effects of the Mesnian pain-inducing device were not permanent, Spock didn't want to waste any time getting to Jim, just in case the doctor's evaluation had been wrong.

Quickly Spock surveyed the corridor, then went to a computer relay panel set into the wall. Without hesitation he opened it, and began to work on it. Almost immediately he located the area which controlled the force-fields. Within a few seconds he had de-activated the one outside McCoy's cell. With a loud hum which diminished as the force-field lost power, McCoy's inanimate gaoler was put out of action.

Returning to McCoy's cell Spock pressed a wall switch and the heavy door swung silently open. Looking distinctly relieved, McCoy stepped out into the corridor.

"Well, Spock - I was never so glad to see a Vulcan!" said McCoy, grinning, though still very pale. Then more seriously, "But I didn't much fancy the idea of another interrogation. Thanks, Spock."

"We cannot stay here," said Spock, with a quick glance at his tricorder. "Life forms are approaching. Can you move quickly, Doctor? You look rather unsteady."

It was imperative that they should move before they were caught by the coming Mesnians. It was possible that by switching off the force-field Spock had activated an alarm, yet he did not think so. But if that were the case or not, if they were discovered he would have to stun the Mesnians with his phaser, and as soon as they came round, or were found by others, the whole city would be looking for them. And if that happened they might never reach Jim. Or worse - he might be used as a hostage against both of them, and so far Spock had not seen much evidence of Mesnian kindness to his friends.

"I am rather unsteady," answered McCoy, "but I diagnose I can try to hurry. If I fall over just pick me up - I know your stubbornness well enough to know you won't obey me if I tell you to leave me and save Jim."

"I am glad you appreciate the logic of the situation," said Spock, switching the force-field outside McCoy's now empty cell back on again. "Shall we go?"

As fast as possible Spock and McCoy made their way through the labyrinth of underground corridors, still miraculously undiscovered. McCoy vaguely remembered the way he had been taken when interrogated, and he attempted to lead Spock, though he was still ashen-faced and a little disorientated. It soon became obvious to Spock that McCoy was feeling a good deal worse than he had admitted; several times he became so unsteady that he almost fell, and in the end the Vulcan had to help him so much he was almost carrying him. Yet still they went on, McCoy doing his best to tell Spock which way to go, and Spock quietly checking Kim's life-form readings on his tricorder while he helped the stumbling McCoy along, wondering how long it would be before the doctor collapsed under the strain.

Eventually they came to a downward staircase which McCoy remembered as leading directly to the room where he had been interrogated earlier. As they went slowly down it, Spock was once more reminded of the paradoxes he had observed in the alien city. The staircase had obviously been a moving one a long time ago, but now it was still, and Spock once more had the impression of an ancient, highly-advanced society which had given way to the lesser, far less knowledgeable people whose city they were now making their unnoticed way through.

They reached the bottom of the staircase to find themselves in yet another long corridor, at the end of which was a door through which voices could be heard, and Spock didn't need McCoy's assurance that this was indeed the interrogation room to know that one of the voices he heard was Jim Kirk's defiant one.

"What now, Spock?" whispered McCoy into the Vulcan's ear. "I don't think I'm going to be much use if it comes to a fight."

"Hopefully there will be no need for violence," said Spock quietly, without turning around. "My phaser should be enough to convince them to release the Captain - I have not seen anything in Mesnia as yet which could be described as a weapon. Come, Doctor - we have no time to waste."

Spock drew his phaser, and set it on a heavy stun position. Soundlessly he and McCoy approached the door of the chamber and stopped outside, listening for a moment to what was being said within.

"I've told you everything I can about how the Federation treats new planets who join," said Kirk's tired voice. "There are no secrets in that - there was no need for this. You only had to ask."

"You lie, Captain," said the cold, high-pitched voice which Spock recognised as belonging to Tellan, "and the necessity for this interrogation is proved without doubt by your refusal to tell us the truth about this Federation of yours. You have not told us of its methods for suppressing the populations of the worlds it controls, or of the price we would be expected to pay for joining. You have said that we would not be forced to join, but in that you lie also. Do not think that the Mesnians know nothing of the galaxy - you would be wrong. We may not travel in space, but it is from choice. We know the cruelties of alien peoples, and what would happen to us if our existence was discovered and reported. Your Federation would destroy us, Captain. An organisation such as yours could only exist by terror and suppression of the peoples of the galaxy."

"But that's not true," replied Kirk, and Spock was shocked by the pain he heard in Jim's voice. "Besides... the Enterprise has already reported your existence - a message was sent to Starfleet Command as soon as you first made contact."

"More lies, Captain?" said Tellan, more coldly than before. "You insult my intelligence. I see you need more convincing. Your doctor stood the pain well also, but then he knew little of what we wish to know. With you it will be different. And do not let any loyalty to your crew prevent you from answering - very soon they will find themselves in the same position as you. You surely did not think that your ship would be allowed to go? Oh no, Captain Kirk - we shall see to it that your crew have no choice but to beam down into our custody. They will do so, or they will be destroyed with your ship. Do not think we lack the capability - we do not. Every one of them will be put to this same method of interrogation, and I am sure that at least one of them will tell me what I want to know. And do not forget that our pain-giver has a setting which will kill. I advise you to answer my questions immediately. Reln - engage a higher frequency!"

The Mesnian called Reln turned a small dial on the alien machine attached to Kirk's head. Kirk cried out in agony. At that precise moment Spock burst into the room, his phaser levelled at Tellan, with McCoy following closely behind. Yet still Kirk cried out in unbearable pain as the frequency of the pain-giver climbed higher and higher.

"Turn that device off immediately, or I shall fire," commanded Spock, his voice as cold as a night in Sarpeidon's Ice Age.

In the second's silence that followed Kirk screamed again.

"Now!" ordered the Vulcan, and pointed his phaser at Tellan's head.

"De-activate," said Tellan, and Reln obeyed. Tellan had really believed Spock might try to kill him. It was obvious that Tellan understood Vulcans or phasers as little as he understood the Federation itself.

Spock handed the phaser to McCoy, who kept the two Mesnians covered while the Vulcan quickly went to help his Captain, who seemed to have passed out when the pain-giver had been switched off. Kirk looked very ill, and as McCoy's Medikit had been forcibly taken from him there was not a great deal they could do for him right then.

"Jim," said Spock quietly. "We are here, McCoy and I. Can you hear me?"

Slowly and painfully Kirk opened his eyes, and the Vulcan breathed a sigh of relief, which was echoed by McCoy.

"Yes, Spock, I hear you," said Kirk in a weak voice. "Is Bones all right?"

"I'm fine, Jim, and so will you be when we get you back to the Enterprise," McCoy answered for him.

"There will be no going back anywhere," said the thin voice of Tellan, in a tone so final that Spock raised an eyebrow at him.

"Explain your statement," said the Vulcan in a voice that dripped ice.

Tellan appeared to have recovered from his dislike of the phaser so completely that McCoy began to feel mildly alarmed.

"The doctor may put down the weapon," said Tellan without looking at Spock. "It is useless. The moment you entered this chamber it was rendered inactive by an interesting device left to us by our ancestors."

Quickly, Spock crossed back over to McCoy and took the phaser from him. After giving it a brief examination, he looked at the two Mesnians.

"You are correct," said Spock. "Most curious. The phaser's power reserves have been completely drained."

"It is as my colleague told you," said Reln, a rather disdainful look on his wraithlike features. "Our ancestors knew many things which even your Federation does not. Our computers have many capabilities which you would not understand."

"Possibly," said Spock, in a voice without expression, "but unless I am mistaken, there would be a great deal more that you would not understand. In fact, it is my opinion that you and your fellow Mesnians know very little of the world you inhabit."

Kirk was still struggling to sit up, and to stand. He wasn't making a very good job of it, and Spock went over to help him to his feet. McCoy gave Kirk a quick examination, as much as he could without his Medikit, but he didn't need to tell Spock what he found, for the Vulcan to know that if the pain-giver hadn't been switched off when it was, that there would have been no recovery for Jim Kirk. As it was he was so weak that Spock had to help him to stand.

The three Enterprise men turned to face the two Mesnians, to find Reln and Tellan regarding them with rather peculiar expressions. It was difficult to tell with the unusual Mesnian faces, but they seemed to be showing signs of interest.

"This is strange," said Reln. "You are concerned for your captain. He will recover. And you, Mr. Spock, were concerned enough to attempt to rescue your two fellow officers."

"So he'll recover - it's no thanks to you!" spat out McCoy. The doctor was feeling a lot better, and his concern for Kirk's condition was making him absolutely furious with their captors.

"We regret our treatment of you, Doctor, but it was necessary," said Tellan. "We are not barbarians. But you, Mr. Spock... you are different. You can speak with your mind, as we do, I can sense it. Are Vulcans so different from Terrans? And how are a people as different as yours treated by this Federation?"

"Vulcans have telepathic abilities, and in some ways are different from Terrans," answered Spock. "But the differences between peoples is one of the foundations of the Federation. It is something to delight in, not to fear."

"If your Federation really thought in that way, none of this would have been necessary," said Reln, shaking his head. "But we have had experience of the treachery of other worlds before."

"Is that why you hide yourselves away like hermits, refusing contact with other worlds?" Kirk was still very weak, but he had found his voice.

"In a word, yes," replied Tellan gravely, "and since you will be spending the rest of your lives with us, it is right that you should know the

reasons for our isolation. Many hundreds of years ago, our society was, as Mr. Spock has surmised, a highly advanced one. Our ancestors developed the ability to travel through space, and with high hopes ships went out to explore the galaxy and to make contact with any new peoples they met.

But the harsh truth was that the people they met were cruel, ruthless... they were barbarians. They were everything we Mesnians despise. So our ancestors in their wisdom decided it would be better that we should have no contact with other peoples at all, that we should remain on Mesnia, alone and uncontaminated.

So that no future generations should ever be tempted to make the attempt to go out into the galaxy again, the planet's computer system was developed to such a high extent that it could run the planet alone, and permanently. Then all records of our technological knowledge were destroyed."

"All of them?" asked McCoy incredulously.

"That would explain a great deal," said Spock, "but it appears that some of you still have some of that knowledge."

Tellan nodded. "Our ancestors knew that some things would always need to be understood, at least a little. So a few of us do still have some knowledge - we learn our own specialised areas from our predecessors, and keep what we learn in our memory. Nothing is recorded, as it was ordained. Reln, for example, understands how to operate the devices in this chamber. My speciality is organisation. And we both communicate orally, though naturally we have the same telepathic abilities as all Mesnians. When Mesnia closed its society, our inherent telepathic powers were developed over the centuries, until we now communicate through thought alone, save those few of us who still speak, an ability retained especially for an occasion such as this."

"You mean that you foresaw that people from other worlds would eventually find you?" gasped Kirk, who was still feeling very ill, though Spock didn't have to hold him any more.

"And naturally, one of your colleagues understands the exact operation of our transporter?" said Spock, more as a statement than a question.

"Naturally," replied Reln. "But there are some areas of knowledge that were lost, and which we need. That is another reason why you must all spend the rest of your lives on Mesnia."

"But that's monstrous!" Kirk was beginning to believe that the Mesnians really did have the ability to stop the Enterprise from leaving. "You can't keep us all here. If you really believe in the things you say you do, how can you even think of it!"

"If knowledge is what you require, you have only to ask," said Spock. "And if it is your wish that you should have no contact with other worlds, the Federation would obey that wish. There is no need for you to keep the Enterprise, or us, here against our will."

Reln became very thoughtful, and then made a suggestion. "There is a possibility," he said slowly, as if he thought his suggestion would not be well received. "If Mr. Spock would submit to a telepathic examination, we could ascertain how much truth there is in your words."

"It would be possible? It was not possible with the Captain or the Doctor," said Tellan, as if he saw a possible solution to a situation he found distasteful.

"They do not speak with their minds," said Reln.

"I have no objection," said Spock without hesitation.

Kirk and McCoy watched as Reln approached Spock and put his hand to the Vulcan's forehead. Kirk presumed it was a Mesnian version of the mind-meld position. As he watched the look of intense concentration on the Mesnian's face, and the lack of anything on Spock's, he hoped fervently that Reln wasn't

probing too deeply into that part of the Vulcan where his friend kept his hidden emotions. Kirk didn't underestimate the Mesnians' telepathic powers, and he didn't know what Reln's probing might do to Spock's control. If their powers were great enough, they might even be able to cause insanity, if that was what they wanted.

Spock should never have agreed! A sudden fear seized Kirk, and he launched his weakened body forward, reaching in an attempt to knock Reln away from Spock and break contact. The effort was too much for him in his weakened state; he missed, and began to fall.

But he didn't reach the ground. Spock caught him as he fell, and helped him to his feet once more. As Kirk looked at Spock he saw with great relief that his Vulcan friend looked the same as always.

"Your concern is noted, Captain," said Reln, with an attitude of interest more than annoyance, "but it is unnecessary. We have spoken to you only the truth, and it seems that you have spoken the truth to us also."

"From the impressions Reln's mind gave me which he received from Mr. Spock, I have decided that it will, after all, be possible to allow the Enterprise to leave." Tellan's manner was still grave, but Spock could detect an air of relief about him.

"And us?" asked Kirk. It looked like Spock had saved the day again.

Tellan paused for a moment before replying. "Two of you may leave, but one must stay. Peranently. Since the knowledge we require is medical, that one must be Dr. McCoy."

"So that's why you lured me down here in the first place with that story about a non-existent epidemic." McCoy was stunned. "But you don't have to use force to gain help from us. Any medical man would be only too glad to come here and help you - the Federation has many doctors equally as competent as I."

"But they are not here, and you forget our wish to remain isolated," said Reln.

A nasty idea was beginning to form in Kirk's mind. "But if you let Spock and me - and the Enterprise - go free, what's to prevent us using force to set McCoy free once we're back on board? I'm sure you realise what a Starship's capabilities are." Kirk didn't like the turn this was taking.

"I believe they mean to use a telepathic implant," said Spock tonelessly.

McCoy looked at him in horror, understanding what he meant. Kirk carried on regarding Tellan intently.

"Correct, Mr. Spock," admitted Tellan. "We will implant in your mind and the Captain's the belief that the doctor really did die in a transporter accident. You will believe that you have seen the evidence. You will leave Mesnia and never return, always remembering that our world wishes no contact with the rest of the galaxy."

"But you couldn't use telepathy on me before!" protested Kirk, clutching at straws.

"That was when we tried to gain information from you. Implanting it is a different matter." Tellan was deadly serious, and there was no-one in the chamber who did not know that he meant every word.

"No!" Kirk almost shouted. "You can't keep Bones - I'll stay instead!"

"You can't, Jim," said the quiet voice of Spock. "You do not have the necessary medical knowledge. But it would be more logical if I were to stay - I could use the computers to recall all of Mesnia's forgotten medicine, in fact all of its forgotten knowledge. It was not destroyed, Tellan - only the ability to use it was lost. The tricorder readings I took of your computers the moment I arrived here confirmed that all their circuits are still intact."

Tellan's mouth was doing the Mesnian equivalent of hanging open. ReIn spoke for him. "Dr. McCoy can go - it is Mr. Spock who must stay."

"No, Spock - I won't let you sacrifice yourself for me!" McCoy almost shook the Vulcan.

"It's no good, Bones - he won't listen to anything we say," Kirk said tiredly, pain in his eyes. Spock had made up his mind, and nothing would move him.

Anguished as they were, Kirk and McCoy did not notice the two Mesnians looking at the three of them with very strange, almost benevolent expressions.

"You would all willingly stay in each other's place?" Tellan asked the question as if he already knew the answer.

"You know that we all would," Spock said evenly.

Tellan and ReIn nodded at each other, as if confirming a decision. "Then you may all return to your ship."

Several hours later the Enterprise was once more travelling through the far reaches of the galaxy under the command of James T. Kirk - much to the relief of Lieutenant-Commander Montgomery Scott, as well as everybody else on board. McCoy had thankfully returned to Sickbay, for once not grumbling about the transporter which brought them safely back to the great Starship.

After a short rest in Sickbay, an examination, and a good deal of argument on Kirk's part, McCoy had finally allowed the Captain to return to the Bridge, and though still looking paler than usual, a much-recovered Jim Kirk was now standing talking quietly to Spock as the Vulcan worked at his science station.

"So when you made your offer to stay instead of me or Bones, it finally convinced them of our integrity," Kirk was saying.

Spock nodded thoughtfully. "It was not just I - your offers were also taken into consideration."

"Well - whatever made them change their minds, Mesnia will be a welcome addition to the Federation." Kirk shook his head at the complete turnabout the Mesnians had done on their policy of isolation.

"Once they were finally convinced that we were telling the truth about the Federation, they saw the logic of joining. They are not an irrational people," said Spock.

"When the help they asked for arrives, there's going to be a few centuries learning crammed into a small space of time on Mesnia. Do you know, Spock... Bones told me that for centuries, if anyone got sick, they just weren't treated? It's a good job they're naturally resilient. One thing I can't figure out, though, is who the aliens were that they came across on their first expedition into the galaxy - they must have been real savages, the effect they had on the Mesnians."

"Whoever they were, in all probability over the centuries they will have learned the wisdom of peace - most peoples do eventually," said Spock, and Kirk knew that he was thinking of the savage, but long-forgotten heritage the Vulcans and Terrans both shared.

"I've never come across a people who can't learn something from another," said Kirk, knowing that Spock's offer to stay in place of him and Bones hadn't been entirely logical.

As Spock watched his friend walk back to the centre seat he was thinking of things which could still be learned, even by the most advanced of peoples, even by a Vulcan from a Human.

No, Jim, Spock thought silently, neither have I.

THE AURA VIRUS by Kelly Downes (Age 10)

Kirk was looking for his First Officer. He and McCoy had been searching the ancient ruins for hours, looking for him. All of a sudden Kirk saw something blue just visible from behind a large stone.

Jim Kirk and Dr. McCoy rushed over to see Spock lying on the ground with a large cut on his hand. McCoy got his tricorder out and took readings from it. Spock was unconscious, so they decided to take him on the Enterprise.

When on board, Spock was rushed to Sickbay. McCoy dressed his hand and made tests, only to find that Spock had a virus from the planet, that he had got from the cut made by a sharp stone when he fell.

McCoy couldn't find an antidote to the virus, so they found out from the computer that only Vulcans had an antidote to the Aura virus.

So they set a course for Vulcan. On the way McCoy gave Spock a vitamin shot, because being unconscious he couldn't eat.

A week later they went into orbit around Vulcan and asked Vulcan Central if they could send a shuttle down with three members of the Enterprise crew, one of them with the Aura Virus. Vulcan Central agreed for the shuttle to land. McCoy put Spock on a stretcher in the shuttle.

Coming in to land, they had an engine malfunction, and crashed. McCoy and Spock were uninjured by the crash, but Kirk broke his leg.

McCoy took both of them to a Vulcan hospital, where Spock was taken into care and Kirk had his leg treated.

The Enterprise called Dr. McCoy to tell him that they were going on an emergency mission for Starfleet, so McCoy went to tell his Captain, who wanted to get out of bed, but McCoy wouldn't let him for ten days.

In that time Spock was getting better, and awoke to see Kirk in the next bed. Spock wanted to get up, but McCoy wouldn't let him, either.

McCoy started nagging because the Enterprise left him in a Vulcan hospital. Kirk and Spock heard him say,

"I wish the Enterprise would come back and take us off this planet!"

COMING BACK TO JIM by Sharon Stockley (Age 8)

Jim, I'm coming home now
from my loneliness.

I would not stay there
any longer,

Hi away in the dark
far away from you.

I did not have anyone
to help me and talk to.

I was so lonely and sad;
now I am with you again.

Now I have someone to love
and care for.

Jim, I'm so happy
to be with you again.

Now I have a chance to be free,
and see someone I love.

Jim, I love you very much.
I will never leave you again...

I could not, would not.

Spock, I am glad you said that.

I will ~~remember~~ -
it means a lot to me.

Shall we go back to the ship now?
Now we have found you...

Scotty, beam us up.

A FURTHER PIECE OF THE ACTION by Therese Holmes

It is easy, with the benefit of hindsight, to say that Jim acted wrongly, that he should have contacted Kalo first instead of just beaming down unannounced. But I was there, and I know it would have made little, if any, difference. Perhaps what happened would have happened later instead of sooner, but it would have happened anyway. Of that there can be no doubt. The Iotians were ready and waiting for the right moment. Jim's sudden appearance simply brought that moment forward a little. And to those who would still criticise him, I can only say this - if it was a mistake, then he paid for it, and painfully.

It was the start of the new mission, and we were fresh out from Earth - for the second time. Jim had reluctantly agreed to take the rank of Commodore, since it was felt that a demotion, even voluntary, from Admiral to Captain was not good publicity for Starfleet Operations. The official story therefore was that the hero of the V'ger incident had volunteered to take the unfortunate Captain Decker's place while a replacement was being found, and a reduction in rank was necessary, since a Constitution class ship could not carry an Admiral as her commanding officer. Of course, no replacement appeared, and we were hurried out into space again as soon as the new navigator arrived. I was offered a command of my own before we left, but I do not believe that it was anything more than a gesture. Nogura knew I would decline - indeed, he was counting on it. The Enterprise, frankly, had become a legend, and the Starfleet Chiefs were not averse to turning that legend to their advantage. Officers who forego advancement, officers who accept downgradation, officers who allow themselves to be drafted out of civilian life, all for the sake of serving aboard the Enterprise - that is good publicity.

Our first mission was to pay a return visit to Sigma Iotia II, since reports had come back from there that all was not well. Briefly, the facts were these, as I learned from Jim at a briefing session en route.

After we left Iotia a ship had returned there every year, as promised, to collect the Federation's 'cut'. Each year the ship sent in a report on the situation as they found it on Iotia, since Starfleet had never been too happy with Jim's novel solution to Horizon legacy; and with the added problem of the communicator carelessly left behind by Dr. McCoy, they felt - with reason - that it was necessary to keep a close check on the Iotians. They were an intelligent people, easily able to unravel the technology behind the communicator; and they were compulsive imitators. Given the opportunity, they would produce copies, along with any spin-offs it occurred to them to invent, doubtless of an increasingly destructive nature. From communicator to phaser is but a short step. They would have attained an advanced technology prematurely, and we would have been guilty of contravening the Prime Directive.

Fortunately the communicator appeared to have vanished without trace, and nothing of the kind had been reported. The visiting 'Feds' had gradually introduced them to new ideas, and slowly they came out from under the influence of The Book. For a while they seemed once more to be a normally developing culture.

We had left Bela Oxmyx as sole Boss of the planet. Later, as a first step towards democracy, he changed the title to President. The following year, in the first elections, he was heavily defeated by his former henchman Kalo, and he retired in high dudgeon. He had not been heard of since.

The annually visiting Starships reported that Kalo appeared to govern efficiently, but every year the cut grew smaller, until at the last visit there was no cut at all. Furthermore, the Iotian officials had made it clear that there would be none in future either, and that the Federation could therefore save itself the trouble of sending ships out to the edge of the galaxy to collect it.

This did not in itself trouble Starfleet greatly; after all, the cut had only been put back into the planetary treasury and used for the Iotians'

own benefit. If they were now in a position to help themselves, well and good.

What was disturbing, however, were reports that they were not, in fact, in such a position. The Iotian economy was not flourishing. The last ship to visit, the USS Valiant II, had been unable to stay long, but they had seen enough to realise that something was very wrong. A card game called Fizzbin, which Jim had somehow omitted to mention in his original report, had become enormously popular on the planet. (Of course, in its original form the game had been unplayable, and the rules had been changed, but it seemed they were still formidable.)

Gambling emporia had sprung up all over the planet, and vast sums of money were pouring into them, very little of which ever found its way back to the populace. It was obvious that a handful of unscrupulous men were growing rich by exploiting a weakness all too common among humanoids. Furthermore, it seemed certain that Kalo, unless he was a complete incompetent, must be aware of the situation and the effect it was having on his planet's economy.

Our instructions were to try and make him see that a society based on a game of chance, besides causing misery and degradation to millions of people, simply cannot last, and in the end benefits no-one. Once more we were to attempt to rescue the misguided Iotians, and set them on the right path. As Jim remarked to me later, rather wryly, Starfleet's attitude seemed to be, "You got us into this, you get us out."

We arrived at Sigma Iotia II, Stardate 9117.32. Having established orbit, we ran a preliminary scan of the planet, which revealed nothing of significance. Jim sat thoughtfully for a while, and then approached me at the library computer station.

"Spock," he said, "we're beaming down. You, me and Bones. I think Mr. Kalo deserves a little surprise."

At this point I must repeat that ~~even~~ had we followed normal procedure and contacted Kalo first, it would have made no difference to the final outcome; except that perhaps Jim might have saved himself a lot of suffering.

We transported down to the same coordinates as on our previous visit - an intersection near a yellow fire hydrant, not far from Bela Oxmyx's former headquarters. These had since been converted into the Presidential Offices, and it was there that we hoped to find Kalo.

Our first impression, as the transporter effect faded, was the Mr. Scott had put us down in the wrong place. On the last occasion the street, though drab and dull in appearance, had at least been bustling and alive. Now it was deserted, save for a few shuffling, aimless figures. Windows were boarded up, and litter blew in the wind. One or two automobiles were parked at the side of the road, but no traffic was moving, nor could we hear any elsewhere. In stark contrast to all this, and seeming almost an affront to the ingrained misery surrounding us, garish posters adorned every available wall, several layers thick, elbowing their way into the public eye. They were all advertising establishments with names like 'Scarlatto's', 'Masci's', 'Opal Resort' and so on. Obviously these were the Fizzbin Casinos that we had heard about, and I noticed that Jim winced as the posters caught his eye.

"Let's go, gentlemen," he said rather hurriedly.

"Well, I must say, Jim," remarked McCoy as we strolled along, "it's been a load off my mind to know that my communicator hasn't caused any trouble. I've had recurring nightmares for years that one day I'd wake up to find Federation space invaded by Iotians armed with super-advanced technology, and all because of one lousy little communicator. Instead, it looks as though they've been more concerned with your modest little invention. Boy, they certainly don't do things by halves, do they?"

"It's all very well for you to joke, Bones," replied Jim, frowning worriedly, "but it's my head on the block if we can't sort this thing out. It was me who brought Fizzbin to Iotia."

McCoy uttered an obscenity indicative, I believe, of strong disagreement. "Your Fizzbin was pure moonshine! A cockeyed computer couldn't have played it. Whatever this thing is that's got its teeth so deep into these people, it sure as hell isn't your little baby!"

"Captain," I interrupted, "observe if you will that man who has just emerged from a side turning ahead of us."

Jim stopped dead. "Damn!" he muttered. "A Klingon. And he's going into Kalo's place!"

"Precisely. This renders things rather more complicated."

"On the contrary, Mr. Spock. It renders them a whole lot simpler. C'mon, gentlemen - now we're really going to surprise Mr. Kalo!"

He marched off purposefully, and Dr. McCoy and I followed, exchanging glances. I was beginning to feel the first stirrings of unease, but I said nothing, trusting Jim not to do anything foolish. He kept on marching, straight up the steps and into the building, and disregarding the protests of a young lady calling herself a secretary, swept through a door marked, 'Rocky Kalo, President'. I felt that perhaps a little more restraint could have been shown, but we had, perforce, to follow.

Kalo was seated at his desk, studying some papers. Beside him sat the Klingon, who sprang to his feet at our entrance. Kalo, to his credit, exhibited no sign of surprise, anger, or alarm, beyond a short, startled gasp. As Jim stood waiting for him to speak, he reached out a reassuring hand to the Klingon.

"Relax, Krett. It's only Kirk. And - uh - oh yes, Spocko. And Doc McCoy. I'm glad you gentlemen dropped by. I have a little score to settle with the Captain and his bat-eared friend. Some years ago, you robbed me and my buddy of a suit of clothes apiece. Remember? I've waited a long time to get even with you, Feds!" He spat the word.

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to wait a little longer," replied Jim sweetly. He turned to the Klingon. "Krett, what is your business here?"

"I might ask you the same question, Captain - or should I say Commadore?" replied Krett, who seemed to have recovered his composure.

"Captain'll do," said Jim shortly. "We have legitimate interests on this planet, established by myself five years ago. Recently, the Iotians seem to have turned inexplicably hostile, and when we find Klingons running around where Klingons have no business to be, we begin to get curious."

"I assure you, Commadore, you have no 'interests', as you call it, on Iotia. For the past five years, you have been extorting money from these people under false pretences. Thanks to us, they are now wise to your ways, and I thought it had been made clear that the Federation were no longer welcome here."

"That's as may be. But Iotia hasn't much to attract speculators, and the Klingon hasn't lived who ever acted from altruistic motives. To put it plainly, Krett, what do you get out of it?"

Before Krett could reply, Kalo held up his hands placatingly. "Gentlemen, gentlemen. Let's not get all heated up over this, huh? Why don't you Feds draw up a seat, and we can discuss this like civilised persons. I'll have some refreshments sent in."

He pressed a button on his desk as we sat down. "Now then. As Krett here was saying, we on Iotia have had enough of you Feds and your forty percent. Nothing personal, you understand; it's just that we figure we could put the money to better use. So you won't take it unkindly, I'm sure, when I tell you creeps to get lost, and never to show your faces here again. On the other hand..."

The door opened to admit four burly guards, bearing weapons which were undeniably phasers. I distinctly heard Dr. McCoy groan beside me.

"On the other hand," continued Kalo, drawing a phaser of his own and levelling it at Krett, "we're pretty sick of you Klingons too. Know what I mean?"

"What treachery is this?" roared Krett, springing from his chair. "Where did you get those weapons? They're Federation type - Kirk... what the devil...!"

"Pipe down, Krett," ordered Kalo. "These aren't Federation type. They're pure Iotian; but I guess you can thank the Doc here for the original idea. Now, Kirk..."

He turned to us, and with lightning reflexes, Krett pulled his disruptor and fired, killing Kalo instantly.

I must pass over the events that immediately followed, since I was not there to appreciate them. In the general melee that ensued I was caught by phaser fire and stunned.

I awoke to find myself back aboard the Enterprise, and in Sickbay. Scanning myself mentally for damage, and finding none, I accordingly decided to discharge myself, but as I approached the door it opened and Dr. McCoy appeared.

"Now where do you think you're going, Mr. Spock?" he asked in that sarcastic way of his.

"To the Bridge, Doctor," I replied.

To my surprise he merely nodded in a preoccupied way. "Good idea. I'll come with you."

As we walked towards the turbo-lift I enquired about the Captain.

"Er, well, that's the trouble," he said. "I was about to tell you. Jim was kidnapped."

"Kidnapped?" I stopped in my tracks.

"By Krett. We would have told you before, but you've been asleep for three hours - now don't look like that," he said as I turned once more for the elevator. "You took a hefty blow down there, and even your Vulcan constitution needs time to recover. I'm not sure you should be on your feet as it is, but I'm not going to argue..."

"What has been done to locate the Captain?" I interrupted.

"Scotty's done everything possible; scanners, search parties; he's alerted the Iotians... The trouble is, things seem a little confused down there..."

We arrived at the Bridge, and I did not wait to hear more. "Report, Mr. Scott," I said, relieving him at the command chair.

"Well, sir, it's a nasty situation. We canna find a trace o' the Captain, or that Klingon devil that made off wi' him. I sent down a search party as soon as I got Dr. McCoy's message, but they've not been able to find a thing. There's no clue at all, sir, and those Iotians are no help. At best they're indifferent, and at worst, openly hostile. Only Kalo's men seem to have any idea of what's happened - and speaking of Kalo's men, he seems to have had a regular secret army hidden away down there, sir. He must have been just biding his time, waiting for the right moment to turn against the Klingons, and when the Captain appeared..."

"Kindly spare me your specualtions, Engineer," I interrupted, "and confine yourself to the relevant facts." (At times of stress I grow impatient of the Human penchant for inconsequentials.)

"Aye, sir. Well, as I was saying, Kalo's men are as eager as us to find Krett and his friends - apparently there are several of them - but they regard us as just as much the enemy as the Klingons. So there's no cooperation, sir, and if they find the Captain first, well... I wouldn't like to say what would happen, sir."

"Then we must see to it that they do not find him first, Mr. Scott. Continue scanning, and double the search party."

"But sir... Aye, sir."

"Why do you think the Iotians are so hostile towards us, Spock?" asked McCoy. "We've done nothing to harm them."

"Obviously they are under the impression that we have. No doubt Kalo has been spreading anti-Federation propaganda, blaming our rapacity for the decline in their living standards. It is, after all, an undoubted fact that we have been annually collecting forty percent of their Global Product, but it was less generally known that the money was all channelled back into the planetary treasury."

No, what interests me is what the Klingons are doing here. I suspect they are behind this Fizzbin mania, and that Kalo was fully aware of it. It is more than likely that he was sharing in the profits, for vast sums are obviously being made here."

"But what would they want with Jim? He's no use to them. Dammit!" McCoy fumed, striking his palm with a clenched fist, "I feel so helpless, sitting up here. I wish there was something we could do, but with Kalo dead there's no-one in authority down there that we can turn to. When I think of Jim in Klingon hands... I'm sorry, Spock, but I can't help it. And it's all because of my blasted communicator."

I felt that the doctor's logic was, as usual, impaired, but I refrained from comment. I too was worried about Jim. In my experience, Klingons did not go far without an array of finely wrought instruments of torture, including, in all probability, a mind-sifter. The memory of my short spell under that fiendish machine was still sharp, and I shuddered inwardly to think of Jim subjected to the same treatment. That fine, resilient mind would never withstand the pressure; it would be blasted, and Jim, if he survived, would become a vegetable...

My thoughts were interrupted by Dr. McCoy. "I was about to upbraid you for being a heartless machine, but I can see you're as worried as I am," he said, and I wondered what he must have read in my face. He touched my shoulder lightly as he turned to go. "I'll be in Sickbay if you need me."

For the sake of completeness, I now include an account of what happened to Jim while we were unsuccessfully searching for him. It was some time before he would speak of it, even to me, and I think the reason for this will be apparent from what follows.

Krett had stunned him in Kalo's office, and he awoke to find himself tied to a chair by his wrists and ankles. He was naked. The room was empty, but there was evidence that, wherever he was, he was not alone. He could hear voices in the next room, one of which he recognised as Krett's, and although he could not make out what they were saying, it was obvious that they were conducting a heated discussion.

He looked round the room carefully. It was small and bare, and his chair was roughly in the centre, facing the door. To one side stood a table, on which were placed some objects unfamiliar in appearance, but whose function was all too obvious. Their compact size, the evident fact that they had all been removed from a small black case standing nearby, and the fact that he was sitting like a trussed chicken awaiting his fate, all proclaimed them to be a sort of travelling torture kit.

The door opened, and he was no longer alone. Outside, the argument was still raging, and he caught snatches of it, obviously directed at his visitor, before the closing door muffled them again.

"... here any time now..."

"... you and your inventions..."

"... haven't time to waste on..."

The Klingon stepped to the table and stood looking down at his instruments.

//Like a woman at her jewellery box// thought Jim, //wondering which she should wear tonight.//

And when he did choose, the aptness of the analogy drew a wry grin from the Captain. It was a pendant, a medallion on a chain. In the centre of the medallion was an iridescent stone. Wordlessly, the Klingon plucked it around Jim's neck, arranging the medallion so that it lay in the exact centre of his chest, over the breast bone. Then he picked up a studded bracelet, //The tiara next?// thought Jim, and fastened it around his own wrist. He pressed one of the studs, and Jim looked down to see that the jewel on his chest had come alive, and was glowing and pulsating with colour. Apart from that, he could discern no other effects.

Finally the Klingon spoke. "I am Korl. Perhaps you have heard of me."

"No, I'm afraid not," replied Jim.

"Hmm. Well, never mind. Soon you will wish you had remained in that state of blissful ignorance."

"What do you want of me?" asked Jim. "I can't tell you anything. Those phasers were just as much of a surprise to me..."

"I want you to look at this," interrupted Korl, ignoring him 'carefully'. He held out a short, stiff whip-like object with a stubby handle at one end, and a small round knob at the other. "I want you to appreciate the months of work that went into it - my work. See the compact design, the faultless finish..." He waved it gently in the air and the flexible part oscillated slowly to and fro. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Jim followed it with his eyes. "What is it?"

"A pain synthesiser. Yes, synthesiser. Not a common, crude old inducer. With this little gadget I can make you feel any quality of pain I desire, in any intensity, and in any part of your body. Observe."

He flicked Jim gently on the cheek with the end of the whip. Jim gasped and tried to flinch away, so certain for a second that he had been lashed that he could almost hear the memory of a whipcrack in his mind.

"Now observe again," said Korl, fiddling with hidden controls on the handle, and stabbing at the buttons on his bracelet.

He repeated the previous action - and Jim doubled over in the chair with violent stomach cramps. They were gone in an instant, leaving him winded and shaken.

Korl chuckled delightedly and rubbed his hands together. "Excellent, excellent. Just as I'd hoped. You will have noticed, of course, that the medallion plays an integral part in the operation. It directs the location of the pain, and is controlled from this bracelet. With the antenna I can produce anything from a generalised ache throughout your body, to the stimulation of a single nerve fibre if necessary, with all the infinite combinations and variations that lie between. And of course I can alter the intensity, but that goes without saying. Ah, pain is such a fascinating study," he sighed happily, twiddling dials, "a fascinating study."

"But what is it you want?" Jim asked again. "Aren't you going to ask me any questions?"



"Questions?" Korl looked at him sharply. "What questions?"

"Well, I don't know. That's your province. Why was I brought here, anyway?"

"Oh, that. Yes, Krett did think at first that you had something to do with the Iotians' mysterious new weapons, so he brought you here for questioning."

"But I..."

"Yes, yes, I know. A moment's rational thought showed us that you couldn't be involved. You had no idea we were here, and you had nothing to gain from providing the Iotians with sophisticated weaponry. So it must be as Kalo said - all their own work. Remarkable, really."

"So - what am I doing here?" Jim persisted.

"Full of questions, aren't you? Well, I don't see why I shouldn't tell you. As you may have gathered, my hobby is inflicting pain on sentient life-forms, and inventing more efficient and more sophisticated means of doing so. I've had quite a few successes, really, and a lot of my work has been incorporated into Imperial equipment. I invented the mind-sifter, you know. Yes, not bad for an amateur, really. Anyway, during my stay here on Iotia, I have been perfecting a few modest little tools, which you see before you now." He indicated the table. "You are to have the honour of testing them out for me. I was going to use Iotians, but then Krett came back so opportunely with you, and the others agreed, reluctantly, to let me have you instead. A trained and disciplined mind is so much more satisfying to work with, I always find."

"We may be pushed for time, I'm afraid, since Kalo's people are undoubtedly searching for us."

"But what...?"

"Now that really is enough, Captain. We must get to work, or we shall never finish. Now then; it's quite simple. You just sit there and react, while I test the range of my instruments. I've heard you are exceptionally tough and resistant to pain, so we should really be able to extend ourselves without actually killing you. Feel free to cry out if you wish - though I don't suppose you will. Oh, and I may ask you a few simple questions - your name, your age, and so on - but you probably won't answer, I know. It doesn't matter; it just helps me to assess whether you're still rational. Right, I think that's everything. We can begin."

"Korl, this is madness! I demand that you release me. We're not at war; you have no right to hold me here." A burning sensation was starting in his chest, and slowly spreading outwards, making it difficult to breathe.

"You say... the Iotians are coming. My men will... be looking... too. They'll be looking... for me... Spock... will come... for me... Oh god..."

He stopped talking then, for to open his mouth again would only bring forth screams, and he would not give Korl the satisfaction of knowing just how effective his invention was. Veins stood out blue against rock-hard muscles as fire swept through his very nerves. The cords cut deeper and deeper into his flesh as he strained and writhed, and Korl impassively twisted, twisted at the dialled handle. The knobbed end of the whip stroked gently over his perspiring body, looking for the most preceptive areas. All the while Korl watched and nodded in satisfaction, continuously increasing the intensity.

Abruptly the pain stopped.

"Very good," said Korl. "Very, very good. You are, if I may say so, Captain, perfect for my purposes. Your tolerance is indeed great, yet you react so beautifully, so expressively."

Jim, head sunk on his breast, hardly heard the words through his struggles to drive air into his protesting lungs.

"Now then, are we ready? Very well, here we go again."

The pain snapped him upright, and he all but broke his bonds with the convulsive movement. A low moan escaped him.

Korl tut-tutted under his breath, muttering something about "too much too soon", and moved a dial fractionally. The agony threatening to shatter Jim's skull into a thousand fragments abated slightly, but not for long. The throbbing pressure gathered momentum, and grew and grew, until he did not know whether he was screaming out loud or whether it was merely the blood rushing in his ears. Then just as his brain was about to burst, blackness descended and took him.

He was not granted oblivion for long, however, for the next instant he was awake, every nerve in his body jangling and screaming for mercy. It took him a second or two to realise that the pain was gone. Korl was hugging himself and chortling in ecstasy; then Jim became aware that another instrument was missing from the table, the one he had mentally christened the tiara. It now adorned his brow, and Korl was making fine adjustments to it.

"I thought you'd appreciate that, Captain," he said gloatingly. "I kept that one as a surprise, for when you passed out. This is something completely new and quite revolutionary, and it's gratifying to see it so convincingly demonstrated. You see, with this on your head, the nerve transmissions in your brain are greatly stimulated, making it impossible for you to become unconscious. You can't even fall asleep! Oh yes, it's quite a little torture chamber in itself, quite apart from being a useful adjunct to the more... shall we say... mundane methods.

Now then; I expect you're feeling quite wide awake, so we'll continue."

For hour after hour Jim was tortured, mercilessly, relentlessly, and without respite. The terrible tiara allowed him no rest; his nerves were stretched to snapping point and beyond, and after a while the pain of the whip became less terrible than the staring, searing wakefulness of his over-wrought brain, and the constant twitching of over-taxed muscles by over-stimulated nerves. He was soon hallucinating and delirious. He remembers little of what passed, and that little is too much.

After numberless hours, the pain at last ceased. He heard Korl's voice, horribly distorted, but he could not comprehend the words. His vision was disturbed by flashing lights, and the room appeared to him to be spinning and gyrating. Through it all he saw Korl replace the whip and the bracelet on the table, and leave the room without removing the tiara from Jim's head.

For long hours more, then, he sat, unable to sleep or rest, while every nerve strained and groaned under the onslaught of alien impulses flooding through them. Certainly a man would very soon go insane under such an instrument alone, if it were turned up to a sufficiently high setting. Combined with unbearable pain, such as Jim had been made to bear, it took on a new, grotesque dimension. It takes the hell-hole that is a Klingon mind to invent such things, and Korl, unbalanced and sadistic, undoubtedly possessed a better mind than most - if 'better' is the correct word to use in this context. To satisfy his warped and twisted scientific sense, Jim was driven to the very brink of insanity; and I have always regretted that when the Klingon died, it was not by my hand.

Jim sat on through the interminable night, and somehow he did not die - though by the time Korl reappeared in the morning, death was all he longed for. He has an idea that he was whimpering as Korl approached, but he cannot be sure. By this time he could hardly see, and a constant rushing in his ears rendered him virtually deaf. One can easily imagine the Klingon's remarks, though, as he inspected the night's work.

"Ah, Captain Kirk. Had a peaceful night, I hope? I must say, we're very fortunate; I had expected the Ioatians long before now. Still, they will

find us, sooner or later, so we'd better make the most of what time we have left to us.

We've done all we can with the whip, I think, so there's no need for you to wear this any longer." He removed the pendant from around Jim's neck, being careful not to dislodge the tiara. "Today I want to try out my piece de resistance. Recognise this?" He swung round and held a small, featureless wafer in front of Jim's nose. It was not unlike a computer tape to look at. Jim did not respond; indeed, he was unable to focus on the object, or to comprehend what Korl was saying.

"Hmmm, I thought not. This, Captain Kirk, you will be astonished to hear, is a mind-sifter. Yes, you may well look surprised," (he didn't) "but I assure you it is so. I have managed to miniaturise it beyond all my hopes, and what's more, to incorporate some entirely new features into it. It is these I wish to test today.

You see, this new model is capable not only of probing your mind and forcing information out of you, but also of implanting suggestions and impressions. With this, I can convince your brain that you are in the most mortal agony, such as you experienced yesterday, without the need for all those other gadgets. And it doesn't stop at pain - I can instil fear, horror, rage, envy, even such relatively useless sensations as joy and love. The beauty of it is, that it does not simply create these things and implant them in your mind; it actually draws on the subject's memories and experiences, in the same way that dreams do. Or rather, nightmares." The monster chuckled. "Yes, though I hate to say it, this one little miracle of technology could make all my other instruments obsolete, and cut me off from a very profitable source of income. And what makes it more unfortunate is that the Imperial War Department has seized the original patents for the mind-sifter... But still," he sighed, "I am an artist. What do I care for these wordly matters? And you are eager to see how it works, I can tell. Well, I shan't keep you waiting any longer. Let me demonstrate one of its more cunning aspects - it fits in here, see?" He slotted it into someplace on the tiara. "And the two work in conjunction. Smart, eh? Now we won't be bothered by you passing out all the time, which has always been one of the drawbacks of the mind-sifter up to now."

He returned to the table and fitted the bracelet once more about his wrist. "I think you had enough of pain yesterday - we don't want you becoming accustomed to it. Today we'll try fear." At the last word he pressed a button on the bracelet, and Jim stiffened, eyes staring wildly.

He was back in the castle on Pyris VII, and he was alone. Alone, that is, except for the ghostly and sinister things that inhabited the place. Not just Korob and Sylvia this time - he could sense something far more evil lurking there. It was coming closer, he could hear it, a shuffling, slobbering sound just round the corner, and in a sudden blind panic he turned and ran.

The castle was much bigger this time, and he was hopelessly lost in the maze of passages and damp corridors. On he ran, and on, and every time he stopped for breath the nameless horrible thing was just behind him. He could not escape, and others were joining in the chase, things that laughed insanely, things that wailed and screamed like souls in torment. He was convinced that all the denizens of Hell were at his heels, and still he ran, getting nowhere.

They were nearly on him now. He had to turn and fight. He had to turn and face his demonic pursuers. He turned - and saw my face; and then he was falling, dizzyingly downwards, down, down into Hell.

His first sensation when he awoke was of pain. A generalised pain throughout his whole body, intensified at his wrists and ankles, which on later inspection proved to be raw and bloody from the ropes; at his throat, where he was parched and dry through want of water; in his head, which rang unnervingly with every sound; and at his ribs, which he realised belatedly were being kicked repeatedly. He opened his eyes with an effort, and found himself lying on the floor looking up at a burly Iotian.

"Oh, so you are alive," said the man. "I was beginning to think we'd have to leave you out for the carrion birds. Get up."

Jim tried to comply, but his limbs would not obey.

"I said, get up," repeated his captor, hauling him roughly to his feet.

Jim promptly fell down again. Strong arms lifted him, none too gently, and dumped him in a chair.

"We have a few questions to ask you," said the Iotian.

Jim was still naked, confused and frightened. The tiara and attendant mind-sifter were gone from around his brow, but the effects still lingered, and he had barely wit enough to realise that he was no longer Korl's prisoner. Furthermore, he was very tired, in considerable pain, and just not in the mood for answering questions.

The Iotians were insistent, however. The burly man put the questions, and another, even burlier, administered the persuasion. There were others in the room, but they took no part in it.

"What did you tell the Klingons?"

Jim shook his head, unable to force words past his dry lips. A left hook dazed him for a second. Coming to, he managed to croak, "Water..."

"Water?" The Iotians looked at each other, puzzled. "Oh, you want a drink, you mean."

Jim nodded.

"Well, ain't that just too bad. No drinkies for you, bud, till you tell us what we want to know. What did you tell the Klingons?"

"Nothing," he whispered.

"Speak up." This was accompanied by another stinging blow.

"I said nothing!" he cried, but it came out harsh and gasping.

"Well, what did they want you for, then?"

"I don't know."

The repeated blows, combined with the after-effects of the previous day, were beginning to make his head spin.

"Korl..." he gasped, in time to save himself from a punch in the stomach.

"Korl... yes?" prompted the Iotian, whose name was Jacko.

"Torture..."

"Tortured you, did he? Now ain't that a shame."

He nodded to his companion, a mindless oaf called Spuds, and an assault on his solar plexus left Jim totally winded.

"Why did he torture you?" demanded Jacko.

"Sadist..."

"Yes, we know that, but what did he want from you?"

Jim could only shake his head in reply, an unfortunate move which brought down such a rain of blows from Spuds as to leave him only partially conscious. Like Korl, however, the Iotians were ready for such a contingency, although their way of dealing with it was somewhat more crude than the Klingon's. A bucket of cold water in his face soon brought him round.

"See here, Kirk," said Jacko, "I ain't got all day. Now we figured, the way Krett ran off with you, you must have something they want pretty badly. Now you tell us they tortured you, and that just confirms our suspicions, don't it? Now the Klingons are no friends of ours, and if there's something

they want so bad they torture a Fed to get it, we wanna know what it is, see? So c'mon - give!"

Jim tried desperately to form the words, but he was not quick enough for Spuds, who delivered him a vicious kick just below each kneecap, with every evidence of delight.

"It would make it easier for all of us if you'd cooperate, Captain," said Jacko.

Despite the pain, Jim felt a sudden absurd desire to laugh hysterically. The situation was almost farcical - for the second time in twenty-four hours he was being tortured for no good reason. At that point he felt he would surely die very soon, and to go in such a way, as the result of a misunderstanding between two forces, with neither of whom he had any connection, seemed somehow ironic.

He controlled his mirth, however, and rallied sufficiently to reply to Jacko before Spuds could intervene again.

"If you'd only let me explain..."

"Explain? We don't want explanations. We want the truth!"

"I'm trying to tell you..."

He had begun to shiver uncontrollably, due to the dousing he had received, and this did not help his articulation. Nor were his wits altogether collected.

"Well?"

"Korl... had a tiara. And a bracelet... a pendant... Like jewellery... but the pain... the pain... sleep... couldn't escape... the pain... oh!"

This last exclamation was the result of further attentions from Spuds.

"What are you talking about?" growled Jacko. "Jewellery... You're nuts! That thing we pulled off your head must've driven you nuts. Now tell us, Kirk, if you don't want Spuds here to attack you again - what did they want from you?"

"To test..." Jim made a valiant effort to be coherent. "Test... inventions. That's all."

"That's all? You are nuts! You expect us to believe that? What do you take us for?" He stood back and regarded Jim contemptuously. "That was stupid, Kirk, mighty stupid. Now we'll show you how we deal with stupid people. Carry on, Spuds."

Spuds set to with a will, and Jim is convinced he would not have survived the bout, if an interruption had not occurred. A sudden commotion was heard outside the door, which had the Iotians diving for cover and for their weapons, and Jim was forgotten. Finding himself unattended, and believing the Klingons were back for him, he bolted.

He was half crazed with pain and fear and fatigue, and he did not stop to think. His chair was next to a window, and through this he leaped, heedless of shattered glass, just as the door burst open and battle commenced. Unfortunately the room was on the first floor, and he sustained further injuries in falling; but miraculously he was still able to move, albeit with a limp.

Here I must leave Jim for a while, and return to the Enterprise, and to our search. Dr. McCoy had returned to Sickbay, but he had not remained there long; nor had I expected him to. Within the hour he was back on the Bridge, fuming quietly, and sometimes not so quietly, at my side. Every so often what little reticence he possessed would desert him completely, and he would burst forth with a stream of imprecations and dire threats directed at the Klingons, the Iotians, and anyone else who dared lay a finger on the Captain.

Then again, he would turn to me and utter a series of rhetorical questions

on the nature of men who could do such a thing, and what they could be supposed to be doing to Jim at that moment, and where.

Most of this seemed not to require an answer, so I gave none, with the result that the unhappy doctor hurled at me his entire repertoire of insults, starting at "walking computer" and "cold, unfeeling devil", and ending with "pointy-eared hobgoblin". All of it I bore with, I hope, stoic calm. I have often found that the presence of the volatile doctor in times of crisis acts as a kind of stimulus to my Vulcan half, enabling me to maintain a cool, unruffled exterior, no matter what is happening to me inside. This is a great asset to my peace of mind, and hence my powers of reasoning and logic, since the slightest tendency to emotionalism is still somewhat distressing to me, and upsets my contemplative faculties. I was therefore secretly glad of the doctor's presence; and though he did not say so, I am inclined to believe that he was aware of this, and that it was partly the reason for his being there.

The search parties, the number of which I had increased to three, called in at regular intervals, and with each report we gained a clearer picture of the situation prevailing on the planet's surface. The men were having frequent encounters with Kalo's 'secret army', and their surprising weapons. Though not particularly well-disposed towards the Federation, their chief enmity was reserved for the Klingons; and it was their one aim to run the aliens to earth in their hideaway, and in their own picturesque phrase, to 'burn them'. Their plans for Jim were somewhat more ambivalent, but definitely not good, and we became engaged in a race to find him first and snatch him away from the vengeful Iotians.

I could not understand this attitude towards us on the part of a body of men obviously well aware of the Klingons and their dealings on the planet. Surely they had not been taken in by Kalo's anti-Federation propaganda, which seemed to have worked so well on the rest of the population?

Evidence of this success was not lacking, as with each report we heard of swelling mobs roaming the streets, with no clear objective except looting and rioting. Such crowds appear wherever there is discord and unrest, and go their drunken and disorganised way until the fire of their grievances burns out. As their numbers and violence increased, they began to pose a greater danger to our men than Kalo's people, since their hatred for the Federation was implacable. They appeared to blame us for their every burden and injustice, and having been informed that the yoke of the Federation had been thrown off forever, they were highly incensed to see us apparently out in force. Of course, as expected, they had never heard of Klingons. Our men's search was considerably hampered by the necessity of engaging in street battles with the maddened populace, a fact which did nothing to improve Dr. McCoy's frame of mind.

"Damn and blast them to hell and beyond!" he exploded. "Can't they see we're on their side? By god, if ever a planet deserved transporting into the intergalactic waste...! What a mentality, Spock! How could it evolve? Whatever happened to Natural Selection? I should have thought Mother Nature would have favoured garden slugs over this bunch of morons!" And more in the same vein.

I tried to calm him, but in truth I felt as frustrated as he. "I know you feel responsible, Doctor, but I assure you that verbal abuse, directed at the Iotians, the Klingons, me, or even yourself, will not increase our chances of finding Jim in time."

He looked at me, speechless, and I knew that the barb had gone home. He remained silent for at least five minutes before launching into another angry tirade.

For fifteen hours I scarcely moved from my chair, nor McCoy from my side. For fifteen hours negative reports flowed in, one after the other, depressingly regular. I was beginning to consider the possibility that the Klingons had somehow transported off the planet, in spite of the fact that our sensors revealed no sign of any other ship in the vicinity. Suddenly my thoughts were

interrupted by Uhura.

"Mr. Spock, I am receiving an audio communication from the planet."

"Put it on, Miss Uhura," I directed, my hopes rising.

But it was not Jim. Instead, a well-remembered voice filled the Bridge, and Dr. McCoy and I looked at each other in astonishment.

"Hey, you up there! This is Bela Oxmyx. Remember me?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Oxmyx," I assured him. "What can we do for you?"

"I'll come to that later. First there's the question of what I can do for you."

"Indeed..."

"Sure. You want your Captain back, don't you?"

"Indeed," I replied, restraining Dr. McCoy with difficulty.

"Well, I can help you there."

"Indeed? And how, may I ask?"

"The Klingons have got him."

"We had already surmised as much."

"Yeah, well what you ain't surmised is where they got him, right?"

"Damn right," interrupted McCoy. "And if you really know where he is, Bela, you'd better tell us now, or..."

"All right, already! Let a person get a word in edgewise, will ya?" There was a pause, perhaps while he shifted his cigar. "It's like this, see. I know where those Klingons hang out. I been watching the place, and yesterday I saw one of them arrive with Kirk over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. I recognised him straight off, and I knew you guys must be around someplace. So I..."

"Yesterday?" McCoy exclaimed suddenly in my ear. "Why the hell didn't you...?"

"Ain't I telling ya?" He was beginning to sound irritated. "Give me strength..."

"Please do not interrupt Mr. Oxmyx, Doctor," I said. "I think it will be quicker if we just let him tell his story in his own way."

"Thanks, Spocko." His tone sounded slightly mollified. "Now where was I? Oh yeah; so I... Well, look, I can fill you in later, as we go. You'd better get down here quick, or you can take it from me, there won't be much left of your Captain to rescue."

"Is it far?"

"About an hour's drive."

"We're on our way. Spock out." I rose to leave, McCoy at my heels. "Mr. Scott, you have the con. Recall the search parties, but have them stand by. When we reach our destination, I will contact you again. And get a fix on Mr. Oxmyx and feed the coordinates to the transporter room."

The turbo-lift doors closed on his reply.

We materialised in a dim alley, with the sound of nearby fighting in our ears. As we looked around Bela Oxmyx emerged from the shadows. He looked older, thinner, and considerably less bumptious than I remembered him.

"Things is hotting up," were his first words. "Get in and let's get going. He indicated a disreputable-looking automobile parked on the kerb. I

entered with some misgiving, remembering the last time I had ridden in one of these vehicles.

"Where is it?" asked McCoy.

"Right across town. We gotta go the long way round, on account of the fighting. Don't wanna get shot up by one of Kalo's mob."

"You had something to tell us, I believe," I said as we sped along the deserted streets.

"Yeah. I guess you guys must be kinda curious as to where I suddenly blew in from. Bet you thought old Bela was done for, right?"

"You could put it like that," replied McCoy.

"Well, I'll tell you how it happened. When that punk Kalo rigged the elections and threw me out, I was sore, mighty sore. My only thought was how to get back at him, and get back on top. So I went away to make my plans, and watch how things turned out. I knew Kalo was rotten, and sooner or later he'd make a mistake; I wanted to make sure it was sooner. That game Fizzbin he'd invented was just beginning to take off in a big way, and..."

"He invented it?" asked McCoy, incredulous.

"Sure. Why?"

"Oh, nothing." He dug his elbow into my ribs, and nodded and winked and smiled at me in a way intended, I suppose, to convey pleasure at the fact that Jim was not, after all, implicated.

"Please go on," I said to Bela.

"Well, he'd built a few gambling joints, and the money was coming in, and he was buying everybody that mattered, and it began to look as though he'd got it made. Then the Klingons moved in. I was keeping tabs on Kalo, y'see, so I knew about them, though nobody else did, except Kalo and his cronies. So I watched and waited, and pretty soon I saw what their plans were. They got this whole Fizzbin thing organised, and turned it into a big business, and got set to become stinking rich. They were like parasites, and Kalo was as bad. He went right along with them, him and his buddies, in return for a fat slice of the action. He became the Klingons' front man, running things the way they said, and the stupid creep couldn't see that he was sucking the planet dry and killing off his own source of income.

Well, I always say a little corruption is good for the soul, but sheer, blind stupidity just gets my goat, and I felt sure there were others who would agree with me, if they knew what I knew. So I started to make a stink, but before I'd hardly opened my mouth, they came and shut it for me. I was evicted from my apartment, fired from my job, and beaten up in the streets. I got the message - 'Stay out of things that ain't no concern of yours'. I'll admit to you guys, I'd underestimated Kalo's power and influence - but once I learn a lesson, I don't forget it in a hurry, no sir. I kept quiet; but I also kept my eyes open, and before long I'd discovered the Klingons' hideout, which not even Kalo knew about; and a lot of other things, like for instance, that I was being watched. They knew that if I could, I'd get word to you guys, so each year when the Feds came for the cut, they'd detain me for the duration. Kidnap, house arrest, whatever. I never made any trouble. I wanted them to think I was a reformed character. Me, Bela Oxmyx, a reformed character - ha! That Kalo sure was dumb.

Then I heard that he'd told you people to scram and to stay scrambled - that was the Klingons idea, of course. The less they saw of Feds the better, from their point of view. But that Kalo, what a guy! No tact, no finesse, and of course you people just came running hot-foot like anybody but a chicken-brain could see you would. So here was my chance. I just had to wait for you to show up, and get in touch with you somehow. My shadows were no problem; they ain't so watchful these days, since I been a good boy.

But things haven't turned out quite as I expected. I hear you surprised Kalo in his hole with a Klingon, and the Klingon burned him. No more than he deserved, I say. He was a hood, and nothing but a hood. As I said, I was watching the Klingons' place at the time, and the first I knew about any of it was when Krett showed up with Kirk on his back. Then I realised I had to change my plans. And then suddenly the city was full of Kalo's heavies, shooting anything that moved with their crazy new gadgets - where those came from, I'll never know - and all at once I saw what must have been going on inside Kalo's garbage-pit of a mind. Take both sides by surprise and throw them both off his back at one go. Nice idea; shame about the outcome. But then, that Kalo always was full of hare-brained notions. I will say, though, he managed to keep his surprise an absolute, vacuum-sealed, water-tight secret. It certainly surprised me.

So anyway, first opportunity, I jumped one of the monkeys and took myself a closer look at his new hardware. It didn't take me long to figure out how to work the blower - and the rest you know.

Throuble is, things have got a bit out of hand, and now everybody's out for the bad guy's blood. For Kalo's mob, that means Klingons, and for everyone else, it's anyone they can lay their hands on, but especially Feds, because they've been listening to too many of Kalo's political broadcasts - written by Klingons, of course."

We had reached a part of the city which seemed to have escaped the worst of the violence we had witnessed during our journey. We turned into an empty street, rows of quiet houses running down each side, all deserted. But as Bela stopped the car and got out he urges us to hurry. We followed him across the street, and down steps to the basement of one of the houses. I swallowed involuntarily as I saw the door, open and hanging from its hinges.

"They beat us," said Bela quietly. "Those gangsters got here first."

I shouldered past him and into the room, where a shocking sight stopped me. Among the blackened ruins of the furniture lay the charred remains of several bodies, and the sickening smell of burned meat threatened for a moment to upset my equilibrium. I felt McCoy at my elbow.

"Oh god," he breathed, surveying the scene. "How do we tell... which is which?"

I shook my head, not daring to speak. The toll, both on life and property, had been considerable. There had clearly been a fierce battle fought, and we had as yet no means of knowing the outcome. Dr. McCoy moved from corpse to corpse, saying something about a post-mortem being the only way of determining which was Klingon, which Iotian, and which - if any - Human. I tried not to think of this last possibility, or of the only Human likely to have been in this place. While there was still hope, I told myself, it was illogical to despair.

At that moment we were roused by the sound of Bela's voice coming from an adjoining room which we had managed to overlook.

"Hey! In here!"

There were three more bodies. One, though badly burned, was recognisably a Klingon, and Bela was crouching beside it. Its arms were flung wide, and the fingers of one ruined hand were clasped tightly round the handle of what must once have been some sort of attache case, but of which only the merest shreds remained.

"Wonder what he had in there," murmured Bela.

In the centre of the room lay an overturned chair, and on the floor next to it, a small sinister object. I felt then that it was an instrument of no good, and Jim has since identified it as the stimulator and mind-sifter. I picked it up and turned it over absently in my hands. The other two bodies were both Iotian, and McCoy was attending to one of them. He glanced up at me.

"This one's still alive, Spock."

Instantly I was on my knees beside him, dropping the device I held. The Iotian's eyelids fluttered, and I grabbed his chin and turned his face towards me.

"What happened?" I demanded, all pity washed from me.

"Gently, Spock," McCoy remonstrated. "Take it easy. The man's badly hurt."

I brushed him off impatiently. Here lay our only chance of finding Jim, and I for one was not prepared to waste time by 'taking it easy'.

"Where is Captain Kirk?" I insisted.

The man whispered something I could not catch.

"What? I can't hear you."

"Took... him..."

"Took him where? Where?" I repeated, resisting the urge to shake him.

"Spock, please..." McCoy laid a restraining hand on my arm.

"Doctor!" I turned on him, not caring for once what he might see in my face. He looked at me steadily for a second, then nodded.

"Okay," he said softly. "Just don't get carried away and kill him."

I turned back to the Iotian. "Where did they take him?" I asked again.

"East... 53rd... Above Rick's..."

I looked up questioningly at Bela. He frowned, chin in hand.

"Yeah, I know it," he said after a moment. "Let's go."

I relinquished my hold on the Iotian, and rose to follow him.

"Spock, I have to get this man to Sickbay," McCoy reminded me.

"Yes, of course, Doctor. Please inform Mr. Scott that I shall contact him when I reach our destination, and request him to keep the Security detail standing by."

He nodded, and I left.

Bela and I drove in silence. It was mid-afternoon, and I have an idea that the city seemed for some reason suddenly empty of all inhabitants, rioting or otherwise. I was not, however, taking much notice of my surroundings, my mind too intent on what lay ahead.

Eventually we arrived at Rick's, a seedy wine bar in a run down part of the city. Some cabs were pulled up outside, their drivers asleep or missing. Above the bar was an apartment, and through one of the grimy windows I could see men gesticulating and talking.

I took out my communicator. "Mr. Scott. Beam down a dozen Security guards to my coordinates, on the double. Spock out."

Bela and I got out of the car and waited while the first six men appeared, and the second. They were followed by a further figure, which materialised into the shape of Dr. McCoy. I nodded at him in mute acknowledgement.

I pointed out the apartment, explaining that I believed the Captain was being held captive inside. "Phasers on stun," I ordered, and gesturing to the others to follow, I set out across the street.

One inside we crept silently up the stairs, to be confronted at the top by a pair of sleepy guards. They made a slight fuss, but we soon disposed of them, and burst through the door they had been guarding.

We were met by a volley of phaser fire, but the only thing I noticed was the sound of breaking glass, and the sight of a naked figure hurtling out of the window. It could only be Jim.

I rushed to the window, heedless of the furore around me, and looked out in time to see him pick himself up off the sidewalk and stagger towards the row of parked taxis.

"Jim!" I cried, but he seemed not to hear me.

I beat a hasty retreat from the scene of battle, which no longer interested me, and flew back down the stairs. As I emerged a cab, with much backfiring and crashing of gears, kangaroo-hopped away down the street. In something approaching desperation I leaped for the nearest cab and, waking the driver with a vicious shake, I indicated the receding vehicle.

"Follow that cab," I said.

"Yes, sir!" he replied, and we set off at an appropriate velocity.

Jim must have seen us, for he too picked up speed, and for many minutes we gained on him but slowly. The chase carried us through the outskirts of the city and into the open country. We were almost upon him, hedges and fields rushing past in a blur, when Jim's cab suddenly slewed across the road, bumped over the grass verge, and fetched up with some force against a tree. The impact lifted the front wheels clear of the ground, and crushed the bonnet like paper. My driver braked with difficulty, but before the cab had stopped I was out and running to Jim.

The passenger door had been thrown open, and I reached in gingerly. He was lying sprawled across the driving wheel, blood flowing freely from a gash in his temple. He was badly bruised and beaten, but a quick, not to say feverish, check revealed that he was still breathing.

I felt suddenly weak, and slumped exhaustedly against the back of the seat.

"Jim," I whispered, resting his head against my shoulder and cradling his broken body in my arms. "Didn't I tell you once before? As a taxi driver, you leave much to be desired."

"Well, Jim, I hope you're satisfied," said McCoy to the prostrate figure on the bed. "Thanks to you, the Iotians have put in a request to the Federation Council asking to be accorded the status of a quarantine planet for the next hundred years. Bela's idea."

"I assure you, Bones," replied Jim fervently, "nothing could give me greater satisfaction than to steer clear of Iotia for a hundred years. But why thanks to me? It wasn't my communicator that landed us in all this; and Spock has told me it wasn't even my Fizzbin they were playing."

"Well, somebody has to take the blame," returned McCoy genially, "and since you were the commanding officer on the Federation's two most disastrous visits to Iotia, it might as well be you."

"It seems to me that the Captain of the Horizon has something to answer for, too, Doctor," I observed.

"Shut up, Spock," said McCoy testily. "Can't you see I'm trying to instil a healthy guilt complex into our Captain?"

I raised an eyebrow at Jim, and he smiled back.

"You had something to report, Spock?" he asked.

"Merely a message from Mr. Oxmyx, Captain. He sends his regards, and hopes you will soon recover from your ordeals. He also extends his thanks for the help he received in 'getting back on top', as he termed it. And he wishes you to know his plans for the Fizzbin casinos during the next hundred years.



He is wise enough to realise that simply outlawing the game is not the answer. Instead, he intends to use the proceeds from the gambling houses to finance other leisure pursuits designed to wean the Iotians from this fatal attraction. It will be a long process, but he hopes it will have been completed by the time the quarantine period is over."

"And I hope we're all still around to see it," said McCoy. "Or do I? Perhaps it would be better if none of us ever saw Iotia again." He looked down at Jim, in the way that an indulgent parent might regard an erring child. "You know, Jim, it took me an hour just to get all the glass out of your hair."

Jim closed his eyes, and I could see he was not amused.

"By the way, Doctor," I said, changing the subject, "did your Iotian patient happen to survive?"

"Of course he did!" he snapped back. "He wasn't as badly hurt as I thought. In fact, I sent him home yesterday. They have hospitals down there; he's not beyond their skill."

"Not now, perhaps, thanks to you," said Jim, opening his eyes.

McCoy glared at me, but declined to comment.

"Bones, I feel fine now," Jim insisted, not very convincingly. "You could at least let me go back to my quarters..."

"No I could not. Whilst I've got you here, I'm going to take the opportunity of putting you on a new diet, and of making sure you stick to it. And what's wrong with Sickbay, anyway?"

"Nothing, Bones, nothing," said Jim, too worn out to argue. He waved a limp hand in our direction. "Throw him out, Spock."

"Now wait a minute!" interrupted the doctor. "This is my Sickbay, and no-one gets thrown out of here without my permission. As it happens, I was going anyway, but I'll be back! Don't stay too long, Spock" he said as he turned to go. "No rip-roaring chess games. I won't have my patients over-excited..."

He continued talking until the doors closed on him, and on the second and last of our rather less than happy encounters with Sigma Iotia II and its inhabitants. If I were given to flights of fancy, I would definitely affirm that I heard the planet breathe a sigh of relief as I signalled the Bridge and gave the order to leave orbit - but perhaps it was only Jim.

SONNET by Meg Wright

Here on this cool, green planet let me stay
And here accept what otherwise I shun,
Here to reveal the outward signs I may
Not show beneath the light of any other sun.

Here I can live, let Human self unbare
All that is buried deep within my breast
Finding that I can love, can learn to share
What elsewhere I withhold and fear to test.

But I must answer to the call he sends,
Responding to his taunts with rage unknown,
Releasing me from that which breaks and bends,
Returning to the bonds I bore, in pain, alone.

I would not have it any other way than this
And yet - the soft remembrance of that last, shared kiss...

ROGER - NOT ROGER? by Meg Wright

Neither Kirk nor Spock spoke as they climbed the steep passages. Christine followed them wrapped in the cocoon of unreality that had gripped her since Roger...no, not Roger, remember, not Roger, had trapped his arm. Maybe when she was alone she could weep for the man she once knew... maybe. She had suppressed tears for so long now, her faith in his life sustaining her against all probability. She had been justified - or hadn't she? Roger... not Roger? She wasn't sure whether she wanted to feel she had just said goodbye, or whether it had all been over five years ago. Roger... not Roger? The words swirled in her brain.

Kirk heard her footsteps falter and slowed down, his eyes gentle. He took her hand, gripping it firmly. The tiny pain helped her back to reality and she returned the pressure, grateful for Human contact. The warmth of his hand enfolded hers like a caress, and they materialised in the bright light of the transporter room fingers still entwined.

McCoy met them, worry lines creasing his face. "Jim! Christine! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Doctor." Christine took her hand away, loneliness flooding her soul as she did so. Behind Kirk, the Vulcan half-turned towards her, checking the movement at its birth.

"Go and take a rest, Nurse," Kirk said.

McCoy watched the doors close behind her. "Work may be a better therapy, Jim."

Kirk nodded. "Keep an eye on her, Bones."

Christine sat among her friends in the rec room, untouched coffee cooling beside her. The terrible, cold loneliness still enclosed her, the irreconcilable memories tangling coherent thought. Across the room McCoy, Kirk and Spock watched her.

"Surely a sedative, Bones...?"

"Who's the doctor around here?" McCoy said sourly. "Tranquillisers don't resolve problems. Christine's adult enough and sane enough to know that."

Their conversation only half reached the Vulcan, her terrible loneliness flooding his mind again as it had when they beamed aboard. Such profound emotion reached through his barriers, touching the well of his own loneliness, searching for a response he could not give.

He rose with a murmured excuse and crossed the room. McCoy watched him with baffled eyes.

"What's got into him?" he demanded.

Kirk had no answer to give him.

Christine felt a feather-light touch on her shoulder. The long, black tunnel surrounding her lightened imperceptibly and she looked up.

"Nurse, I have some cultures I would like your opinion on. Do you have a moment?"

The dark eyes held hers, the touch grew firmer. Life suddenly flowed around



her again.

"I'm excused duties at the moment, Mr. Spock," she said. "I'd be glad to help."

His quiet company was pleasant, the intellectual challenge stimulating. He offered no words of sympathy, and yet his very presence seemed to provide support. At the end of the evening, when she left him to go to her cabin, the old rhythm returned to his mind.

Roger... not Roger? Now it no longer seemed to matter. Roger was dead. She could mourn his memory with pride.

Three days later she was able to give the Captain her decision - to stay.

WITHOUT YOU BY MY SIDE by Susan Meek

I suppose that I could have survived
Without you by my side.
Had fate not intervened, and called you back from Vulcan,
I would somehow have found the strength,
After three years of inactivity,
To set aside my inner doubts,
And, at least for a while,
Create a facade of confidence
With which to command the ship.

I suppose that had you not come back,
I would have coped.
Duty and habit would have carried me through the motions
Of being 'Captain Kirk'.
I could have survived Decker's criticism;
Retained the crew's confidence;
Perhaps even made decisions
That were logical and correct.

It is even possible that without your insight
We would somehow have been able
To survive the V'Ger crisis.
And at the end of it all
I would have been offered the chance of freedom;
To command my ship and roam the stars
As in the days of old.

I suppose, my friend, that you could even quote me the odds
On the likelihood of that particular chain of events
Being able to occur.

I prefer not to even contemplate that possibility.

I would have been empty, hollow,
A shadow of the man I once was.
You have become too much a part of me,
And without you by my side
There would have been no-one to share
The joy of freedom, or having back my ship,
And therefore no joy in it.

For now I know
That not until the moment
You truly returned to me
Was I made whole once more.

VENOM by Ann Preece

James Kirk sat in his command chair on the Bridge of the Enterprise, staring with unseeing eyes at the familiar, ever-changing star patterns on the viewscreen. Was it only three weeks ago that they had left the Guardian's planet? Three weeks since he had stood by and watched Edith die... it seemed a lifetime.

Edith. Even now, it hurt to think of her; she was always present in his thoughts, both day and night. The days could be endured: there were decisions to make, duties which required his attention. But the nights - the nights were almost unbearable. When he was alone, he started remembering: the memory of her, the longing for her, came back to torment him, haunt his dreams. It was said that time was a great healer - but for Edith there was no time.

And for himself?

"We shall be entering orbit around Taman in 1.5 hours, Captain."

He was vaguely aware of a voice behind him - something

about Taman? Why couldn't they leave him alone? Alone with his thoughts, his memories...

"Captain?"

Spock had left his station and had moved to the command chair, unobtrusively taking up his position at Kirk's side. Gently, he laid his hand on his Captain's shoulder.

"Jim."

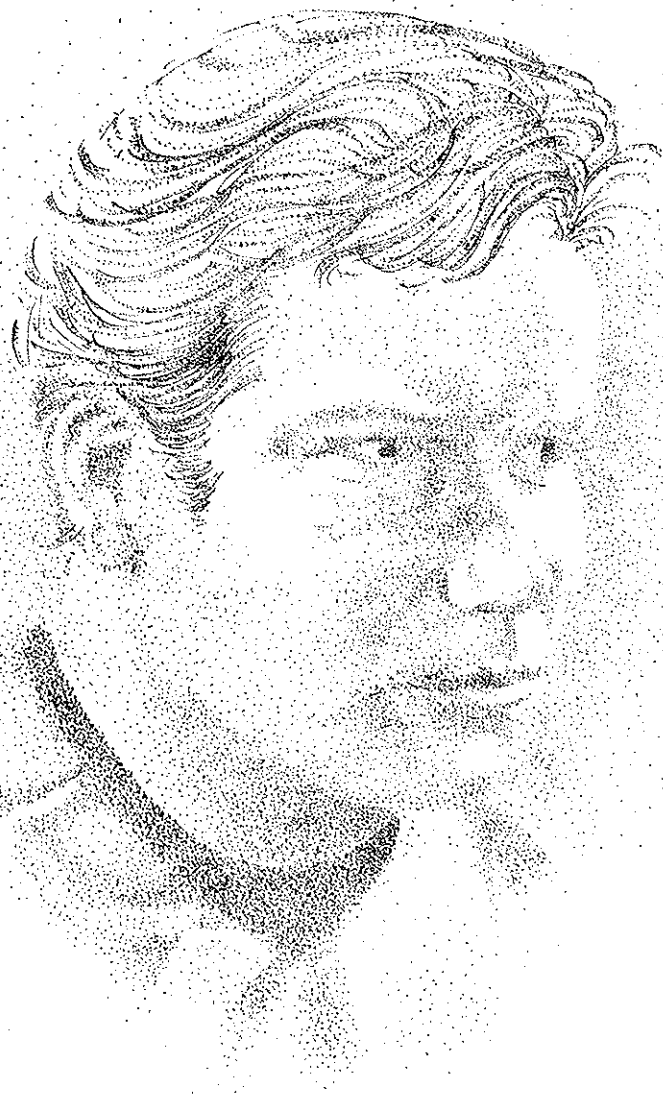
The warmth in that one word was unmistakable, and could not be ignored. Wearily, Kirk dragged his eyes away from the viewscreen, and his haunted gaze met the calm eyes of his First Officer, eyes which conveyed an unspoken message, and one which Kirk understood immediately.

"Sorry, Spock," he apologised. "You were saying...?"

"I was merely remarking, Captain, that we will soon be entering orbit around Taman."

Pushing his thoughts of Edith to the back of his mind, Kirk made a concerted effort to pull himself together. He was the Captain of this ship, wasn't he? There were too many people depending on him - he couldn't allow his personal feelings to encroach on his duties to them. And yet...

He turned his chair round to face Spock. "What information do we have



on this planet, Mr. Spock?"

"Data coming in now, Captain," Spock replied from his position at the library computer. He paused for a few moments before continuing, "According to our records, Taman is an Earth-type planet, breathable atmosphere, excellent vegetation, and land and sea masses in equal proportions."

"Any evidence of life?" Kirk asked.

"Affirmative, Captain. Sensors indicate several large encampments scattered at intervals over the planet's surface. The Tamanians bear a marked resemblance to the American Indians of your Earth's history. If our information is accurate, Taman could be described as a 'Paradise'."

"Sounds just the place for a spot of shore leave," came a familiar voice from behind them. McCoy had entered the Bridge in time to overhear the last part of Spock's speech.

"Bones?"

"This place seems to be just what the doctor ordered," McCoy continued, blithely ignoring the interruption. "If this planet is all that Spock says it is, I think we'd be foolish to pass up such an opportunity for a well-earned rest. The crew could do with a break from routine - they've all been working hard of late - and so could you. A few hours away from the Enterprise, and you'll feel like a new man."

"Thanks, Bones, but I think I'll give this shore leave a miss, if you don't mind - but but don't let me stop you two from enjoying yourselves."

"But, Jim..."

"No, Bones." Kirk's tone was adamant.

In despair, McCoy glanced across at Spock, silently asking for the First Officer's assistance.

"Captain, for once I find myself in total agreement with Dr. McCoy. A rest would do you good. Perhaps a change of scene..."

Kirk switched his gaze from one friend to the other, knowing when he was beaten. Shrugging his shoulders in a gesture of total resignation, he said,

"All right, you win - I can't fight both of you. Mr. Spock, draw up a rota for the crew, and provide Mr. Scott with suitable coordinates for the landing parties. The natives may be friendly, but there's no sense in asking for trouble. In fact, it would be better if no-one knew of our presence here." He stood up. "I'm going to my quarters. Let me know when we reach Taman. You have the con, Mr. Spock." And without a backward glance he left the Bridge, leaving behind two very concerned friends.

As the turbo-lift doors closed behind the retreating figure of the Captain, McCoy turned to face Spock, catching a brief glimpse of concern on the Vulcan's face, before the familiar mask slipped into position once more.

"You're worried about him too, aren't you, Spock?" he asked softly.

"Worried, Doctor? You forget that Vulcans do not..."

"Don't give me any more of that rubbish about Vulcans not having any feelings," McCoy retorted. "We all know that this particular Vulcan has feelings, however hard he tries to hide them. I know it, you know it, so don't pretend with me." McCoy's voice softened as he persisted, "You're as concerned about Jim as I am, aren't you?"

Spock felt that it was pointless to argue with McCoy - he had long since been aware that the Doctor could see through the outer shell he had built around himself - evasion seemed both useless and unnecessary.

"Yes, Doctor, the Captain's behaviour of late has given me cause for concern."

"It's Edith, isn't it?"

"Miss Keeler's death has affected the Captain very deeply. He had grown very close to her during the days we spent at the mission - he has felt her loss most keenly."

"Isn't there anything you can do to help? Jir trusts you - I know he'd turn to you if..."

Spock shook his head. "No, Doctor. I cannot intrude on Jim's grief - not yet. He needs to be alone, to come to terms with his loss. If my faith in James Kirk is justified - and I believe it is - he will come through this, but in his own time. He knows that when he needs my help I shall be here."

The words were spoken with great simplicity, yet McCoy could not doubt their sincerity. The knowledge gave him the comfort and reassurance he needed. The subject temporarily closed, both men returned to their interrupted duties.

Kirk, Spock and McCoy had elected to beam down to the planet's surface with the first landing party.

Scotty had done well. They materialised in a wooded glade, breathtaking in its beauty. Sunlight streamed through the trees, dappling the branches with its golden rays. The lush grass formed a soft carpet beneath their feet, and in the distance could be heard the bubbling sound of a stream as it wound its way towards a far-off ocean.

Taman truly was a paradise - no-one was going to argue with that.

The landing party began to split into groups of twos and threes, and started to drift away in different directions. Eventually, only the three senior officers remained at the materialisation point.

Preoccupied with his own thoughts, Kirk started to move away from his two friends.

"If you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I'd like to spend a little time on my own."

"But Jim, I thought..." McCoy began, then stopped as he caught sight of the warning expression on Spock's face. "Sure, Jim - I understand," he said hurriedly.

"Captain - you will be all right?" Spock asked.

"Yes, Spock - but thanks for your concern. You two go and enjoy yourselves. You deserve a break. I'll be fine, really I will. We'll rendezvous back here in - shall we say - three hours?"

"That will be satisfactory."

"Good. I'll see you both later, then." He turned and headed in the opposite direction, a direction which took him deeper into the wooded glade.

Here, at least, he could be alone, he thought reflectively - alone with his thoughts. There was no likelihood of his meeting any of the others from the landing party, a fact for which he was grateful, for the area in which he now found himself was in direct contrast to the area he had left. As he moved deeper into the glade, so it became darker - the trees were so thick that in places it was almost impossible to distinguish the blue sky beyond the overhanging branches. And it was quiet... almost deathly quiet.

At first Kirk was unaware of the silence, for the glade provided a blessed haven of peace and solitude, such a change from the heavy oppressiveness of the Enterprise. Although he loved his ship, there had been times over the last few weeks when Kirk had longed for such solitude. Now, here in this place, he had found it.

Feeling that he had walked far enough, Kirk glanced around for a suitable place to rest. Ahead of him, his present pathway opened out into a clearing, not a particularly attractive area, yet Kirk, whose mind was on other matters, was totally unaware of his surroundings. He sat down, his back resting against a tree trunk, oblivious of the discomfort provided by the slight dampness of the ground beneath him, for here the overhead branches provided an impenetrable barrier against the sunlight which would have warmed the earth with its gentle heat.

He stared straight ahead, his eyes dim with unshed tears. If only he could cry for Edith, provide an outlet for the grief which threatened to consume him. But he couldn't - not yet.

Memories flashed before his eyes : the way she walked; the way she talked; the way her eyes lit up each time she laughed. There had been other women in his life, both loved and lost, yet no-one had affected him as deeply as Edith. Was that why he felt her loss so keenly?

If only there had been some other way. He would never forgive himself for not trying to save her. Never! Yet... what could he have done? If he had allowed Edith to live, the future as he knew it would not exist. One life for, perhaps, millions. But it was such a high price to pay. Would he ever come to terms with that?

"Edith," he sobbed. "If only I could have saved you! Forgive me - oh please - forgive me!"

But Edith was dead - she couldn't forgive. He buried his face in his hands, feeling the bitter sting of tears on his cheeks, and allowed his grief to pour forth, relieving the emotions he had kept tightly reined for so long.

For several moments convulsive sobs wracked his body, and he trembled with the violence of his weeping. The only image in his mind was that of Edith as she had appeared that last evening before... He shuddered. Even his memories were becoming almost too painful to bear.

Kirk's misery had dulled his senses to such an extent that he failed to notice the danger which threatened him from above. A snake, the largest and deadliest of its kind on Taman, had begun to wind itself down the bark of the tree, twisting and turning as it moved silently closer and closer to its unsuspecting victim. Too late, Kirk sensed that danger was imminent. He turned as a pair of evil fangs sank deep into his neck, and with a cry of pain, he slumped forward into oblivion.

At the materialisation site McCoy lay flat on his back, staring upwards at the white clouds which drifted slowly across the blue sky. He felt comfortable, relaxed... and thoroughly lazy. He glanced across at Spock - even the Vulcan looked rested and at ease as he sat with his eyes closed against the brightness of the sun.

Then, almost imperceptibly, he stiffened. McCoy, who had been observing his companion closely, could not fail to notice his movement.

"Spock - what is it?" he asked worriedly.

Immediately alert, Spock was on his feet. "We must contact the rest of the landing party. It is imperative that they return to the ship at once. Something has happened. I sense evil... danger..."

Something in the tone of Spock's voice brought McCoy to his feet, hastily brushing away strands of grass which clung to his uniform. "What about Jim?" he asked, a worried frown crossing his face.

Spock remained silent, but the look in his eyes failed to provide McCoy with the reassurance he sought.

He watched as Spock pulled out his communicator and flipped it open.

"Spock to Captain Kirk... Spock to Captain Kirk."

There was no response.

"Jim!" There was no disguising the concern in Spock's voice as there was no welcome answer.

Within minutes the landing party had been contacted, and as they began to drift slowly back to the rendezvous point, Spock contacted the Enterprise.

"Spock to Enterprise."

"Enterprise here, sir."

"Mr. Scott, prepare to beam up the landing party, and on no account allow anyone else to transport down to the planet's surface unless I expressly order it. Is that understood?"

"Aye, sir," replied one very puzzled Chief Engineer. "Is anything the matter, Mr. Spock?"

"I am not sure, Mr. Scott. We are, at present, unable to locate the Captain; therefore Dr. McCoy and I will remain here for the time being. We will contact you when we are ready to beam up. Spock out."

The two men watched as the members of the landing party shimmered and then faded from view. McCoy turned to face Spock.

"Something's happened to Jim, hasn't it? Dammit, Spock - tell me!"

"I am not sure. For a second, I sensed that he was in trouble - then, there was nothing."

"I knew we shouldn't have let him go off on his own! We must find him," McCoy retorted. "He could be hurt...anything could've happened to him." He started to move away in the direction Kirk had taken earlier.

They walked on in silence for some moments, both men deep in thought, not wishing to engage in idle conversation, and both far more concerned for the safety of their missing friend than they were prepared to admit.

Characteristically, it was McCoy who broke the silence as he muttered, more to himself than to his companion, "I can't understand why Jim should choose this particular area. It's the last place I'd want to spend my shore leave."

"You must remember, Doctor, that the Captain has not been himself of late. He wished to be alone - we respected that wish," Spock replied, and fell silent once more as they continued their relentless progress through the undergrowth.

After a few minutes they entered the clearing in which Kirk had rested earlier. It was empty - there was no-one in sight. Everything appeared normal, deceptively peaceful, and both Spock and McCoy were unaware of the dangers which lurked, undetected, amongst the foliage.

Spock stared around intently. Kirk had been here - of that he was certain. But he had no proof, only a vague uneasiness at the back of his mind that something was terribly wrong. He knew, instinctively, that Jim Kirk, the one person whom he could openly call friend, and whose friendship he valued above all else, was in danger. He needed their help.

"The Captain was here," he stated simply.

McCoy didn't speak, didn't ask any questions, and when Spock turned he saw only trust and acceptance in the blue eyes which regarded him steadily. In that instant Spock realised that the doctor knew, perhaps had always known, that he and Kirk shared a very deep, very special friendship. An understanding existed between them which could never be broken by distance or time, an understanding which drew them together despite their differing backgrounds and

cultures.

Unbeknown to Spock, McCoy was thinking along similar lines. For just a second, he saw through the mask which the Vulcan presented to the outside world, and beyond it to the inner Spock, a Spock whose devotion to Jim Kirk knew no bounds. Although McCoy would never admit it to another living soul, he knew that if anyone could find Kirk, the Vulcan could. His confidence in Spock was unwavering, and in that moment, he knew that their love for Jim Kirk brought them closer together than any words could have done. Although neither would admit it openly, of course, it existed nevertheless.

"Don't worry, Spock," he murmured reassuringly. "We're gonna find him - of that I'm certain..."

McCoy paused, as he noticed that Spock's attention was caught by a small object, partly hidden in the earth. The Vulcan moved forward swiftly, calling over his shoulder to McCoy.

"Doctor! Over here!"

Bending down, Spock retrieved the object - a standard-issue communicator.

"Jim's communicator!" McCoy exclaimed. "So that's why we were unable to contact him. Well, at least that proves Jim was here - but it doesn't tell us what's happened to him, or where he is now. And why would he leave his communicator behind? It doesn't make sense!"

"Perhaps our 'friends' can enlighten us," Spock replied, very quietly.

"Friends? Spock, what are you talking about? This is no time to be funny..." He broke off as he caught sight of the warning expression on Spock's face.

McCoy turned slowly, almost stunned by the scene which met his eyes. They were completely surrounded by ten or twelve natives, brown-skinned humanoids who bore resemblance to the Indians of Old Earth's American West.

McCoy started nervously, but the strangers made no threatening moves towards them, merely regarded the two Enterprise men with an air of detached interest, as though the appearance of men in strange uniforms was a normal occurrence on this planet.

Spock stepped forward cautiously, extending both hands in what he hoped was a gesture of friendship. "We mean you no harm; we come in peace."

A tall man, older than the others, and obviously the leader of the group, moved towards them. "Why do you come here?" he asked.

Spock felt that to evade the question was pointless. If they were to find Kirk - and find him as soon as possible - then he had to be honest with these people. They might be their only hope of finding Kirk without further delay.

"We are searching for our missing Captain, whom we believe to have come this way. Perhaps you have seen him?" And he went on to describe Kirk's appearance to the listening Tamarians.

When he had finished speaking the leader exchanged glances with his



followers. There were nods of assent, and then he replied, "We have seen this man whom you seek. Come, we will take you to him - before it is too late."

"Too late!" McCoy exclaimed, speaking for the first time. "What do you mean, too late?"

The tall man regarded McCoy steadily for a few seconds. "All will be revealed when you see your friend. Please follow us."

He turned to lead the way through the undergrowth, in the opposite direction to the way Spock and McCoy had come.

McCoy glanced across at Spock, shrugging his shoulders slightly. Spock nodded, and they fell into line, following their silent companions to an unknown destination.

They had not travelled very far when they left the forest area behind, and entered another clearing, obviously the Tamanians' encampment. The scene which met their eyes was one of organised activity. Men and women of all ages were engaged in chores of everyday life, while children played happily outside their homes, rough huts fashioned from wood and vines, extremely primitive, but nevertheless providing adequate shelter and sufficient for the Tamanians' needs.

The leader paused, and beckoned to Spock and McCoy to join him. "Welcome to our home, gentlemen - I only wish the circumstances were happier. My name is Taseen, and these..." he made a sweeping gesture with his hand, "...are my people."

Spock introduced himself. "I am First Officer Spock of the U.S.S. Enterprise, and this is Dr. McCoy. We are representatives of the United Federation of Planets."

At the mention of the Federation Taseen nodded his head. "Yes, we have heard a great deal about the Federation." He smiled as Spock raised a quizzical eyebrow. "We are aware that other worlds exist beyond our own planet, Mr. Spock. Our ancestors left Earth over two centuries ago, and set up colonies here on Taman. As you can see, although we live very simply, we have all that we need... But we are wasting valuable time, and you must be anxious to see your friend. If you will come this way?"

Taseen led the way to a medium sized hut situated on the fringe of the encampment, and pulling aside the vines which covered the opening, motioned them to enter.

It took them a few moments to grow accustomed to the gloomy interior. Spock gazed around anxiously, his keen eyesight taking in the sparse furnishings at a glance. Then, with a cry of "Jim!" he moved forward and dropped to his knees beside the figure that lay, unmoving, on a rough bed of animal skins and furs.

"Doctor..." It was only a whisper, but McCoy heard, and was at his side in an instant, running his medical scanner over the inert form of their friend. The readings did nothing to relieve his anxiety.

"Spock... he's riddled with poison! His entire nervous system..." He turned to Taseen. "What happened?" The question was snapped out, worry making him appear more abrupt than he had intended.

"He was bitten - by the kabooshka."

"The... what?" McCoy asked, not sure whether he had heard correctly.

"The kabooshka," Taseen repeated quietly, and somewhat reluctantly went on to explain that this was the name given to a large snake, the deadliest of its kind on Taman, and a native of the damp, outlying areas which surrounded the encampment. The Tamanians carefully avoided this 'dark zone', unless it was absolutely necessary - hunting expeditions and the like - and then they were careful not to venture too far from the safety of the encampment.

The kabooshka! McCoy shuddered. How could such an idyllic setting suddenly become a place of horror?

It appears that every Paradise has to have its own serpent, he thought. Why, I'll be expecting Adam and Eve to appear at any moment...

He gave himself a mental shake, and pushing the thought away he hurriedly pulled himself together. His concern for Jim was making him too fanciful...

Taseen was continuing with his story, and McCoy forced himself to listen, all the time keeping a watchful eye on Kirk for any sudden change in his condition.

"Earlier today, a group of my people were hunting in the forest - we have found that it is safer to hunt in groups of six or more - when they came across your friend, unconscious, in the same clearing where we found you. They brought him here, and we have tried to make him as comfortable as possible. Then we returned to the clearing to wait. We felt sure that he would eventually be missed, and that someone would come looking for him."

Taseen paused, regarding the two men sadly for a moment, before continuing, "Strangers very rarely come to our world, Mr. Spock... Doctor... I am sorry that your visit could not have been made under happier circumstances." He fell silent.

Spock glanced at the still figure of their Captain, before lifting troubled eyes to McCoy's worried face, silently seeking reassurance from the doctor.

"I don't know, Spock... I just don't know. Once we get him back to the ship..."

"No!" Taseen interrupted urgently. "You cannot move him - to do so would be fatal. We took a great risk when we brought him here, but we could not leave him in the forest. Too much movement causes the poison to spread quickly through the body. To move him a second time might kill him."

"But I can't help him here - I don't have the facilities!" McCoy exclaimed. "At least on the ship I can try and find an antidote to the poison."

"Antidote?" Taseen sounded puzzled.

"A cure," McCoy explained. "A means of healing..."

"But Doctor, there is no cure. If there had been, we would have used it immediately. Our Elders searched for many years for a cure; they failed. We have continued with that search; we too have failed. The cure is within your friend - if he is strong, he will fight the poison which pervades his body; if he is not..."

The unfinished statement hung heavily on the air, the meaning behind the unspoken words abundantly clear.

"Jim is strong... He'll beat this - I know he will." McCoy was desperately clutching at straws, and he knew it.

"Under any other circumstances I would be inclined to agree with you," Spock replied, "but the Captain has been living under a great strain these last few weeks. He had suffered a very deep, very personal loss - and he blames himself for not being able to save Edith Keeler. He might not have the strength to fight this, Doctor. He may not want to live... He may feel that he has nothing to live for."

"Spock! What are you saying? You can't honestly believe that Jim will give in without a fight? If I hadn't heard it with my own ears, I'd never have believed it of you - you, of all people!"

"I am merely quoting the facts as I see them, Doctor," came the quiet reply, as Spock strove to keep a tight rein on his teeming emotions.

Taseen watched with sympathetic eyes as the two men fought to control their mounting anger; both so different, yet both united in their desire to help save

the life of a friend who was so dear to them. It saddened him that he could offer no words of comfort.

McCoy's frustration boiled over. "Then what do you suggest we do?" he exploded, allowing his worry to erupt in a burst of uncontrolled anger. "You can't expect me to just sit here and watch one of my best friends die, without lifting a finger to help!"

Spock's calm voice broke in on his bitter tirade. "Doctor... Bones... Please... Anger will not help you - and it certainly will not help Jim."

McCoy opened his mouth to reply, but the sharp retort died on his lips as he realised that the Vulcan was right - as always.

"Sorry, Spock," he apologised gruffly. "I don't know what came over me. It's just that..."

"I know, Doctor. Please believe me when I say that I do understand how you feel, and... apologies are unnecessary."

Calmer now, McCoy turned his attention once more to his Captain. He looked so pale, so drawn, his breathing coming in shallow gasps. One look at the tricorder showed that Kirk's pulse and heartbeat were low - dangerously low.

"Surely there's something we can do? Surely modern technology can succeed when all else has failed?" McCoy murmured softly. "If only I didn't feel so damn useless..."

"I do have a suggestion to make, Doctor," Spock interrupted. "Beam back up to the ship; put a medical team on a round-the-clock search for a possible antidote. There is always a chance that a cure may be found, and it will not do any harm to at least try."

McCoy nodded his head in agreement - if he could do something constructive, he wouldn't feel quite so helpless.

"It will not do any good, Mr. Spock," Taseen stated.

"Perhaps not - but it is not in our nature to give in so easily, and while the Captain lives there is still hope."

Spock drew out his communicator and flipped it open. "Spock to Enterprise."

"Enterprise here, sir." The reply was immediate, as though Scotty had been waiting for such a call. The Chief Engineer's voice filtered over the distance which separated them. "Mr. Spock! Am I glad to hear your voice - we've been so worried! What's happening down there? Are ye all right?"

"We are fine, Mr. Scott, but I am afraid that the Captain is... unwell."

Was Scotty imagining it, or did Spock's voice contain just a hint of worry? And that slight pause... it was unusual for the First Officer to stumble over his words.

"Dr. McCoy will be ready to beam up in a few minutes," Spock continued. "Would you please arrange for a medical team to meet him in the Transporter Room? He will acquaint you with all the relevant details."

"Aye, Mr. Spock, will do. But... what about you... and the Captain?"

"The Captain and I will be remaining here - at least for the present. Spock out."

He walked over to where McCoy was engaged in taking final readings of Kirk's condition. He glanced up as the Vulcan approached.

"Well, I've done about all I can for the moment. I've given him something to help relieve the pain, as well as a very mild sedative; it won't do any harm, but I daren't give him anything else until I know exactly what it is we're fighting. I've made him as comfortable as I can. He's... in your hands now, Spock. You will take care of him, won't you?" McCoy suddenly looked, and sounded, very tired, as though the worry of the last hours had taken more out of

him than he was prepared to admit.

Dark eyes gazed deep into the upturned blue ones, clouded now with concern for their Captain... and their friend.

"Doctor... surely you know by now that that is one question which you need not ask," Spock replied very softly, and McCoy derived a small measure of comfort from the quiet words.

"I know, Spock - I'm sorry. Worry made me forget that you..." He left unsaid that which they both knew to be true.

Spock watched as, with a request to Scotty to beam him up, the transporter effect took McCoy and he shimmered from view.

Once McCoy had gone, Spock returned to Kirk's side. 'He's in your hands now.' The doctor's word echoed in his mind, and with a silent plea of, Do not let me fail you, Spock turned his attention to his Captain. He placed a cool hand on Kirk's hot brow - a fever had set in, and was beginning to take hold.

There was a bowl of water to Kirk's right. Wringing out a cloth, Spock gently wiped away the beads of perspiration which were beginning to form on his friend's face.

Taseen watched, noting the care with which Spock tended to his Captain's needs.

"This man... you care for him. He means a great deal to you." It was a statement, not a question.

Spock had almost forgotten Taseen's presence until the other man spoke. Now, he glanced across at the Tamaranian, surprised by his perception.

He answered simply, "He means more to me than life itself."

"He is a very fortunate man, to have such a friend as you," Taseen remarked.

"No, Taseen," Spock replied, so softly that the Tamaranian could hardly hear him. "You are wrong - I am the fortunate one."

Taseen turned to leave. "I shall be outside if you require anything. Please call if I am needed." And he slipped away, so silently that Spock failed to hear him go.

For a long moment Spock sat and studied the familiar features of his friend, noting with concern the flushed cheeks, the lines of pain imprinted on his face, the shadows under the eyes. The harsh sound of laboured breathing filled the air, and tore at Spock's heart, cutting through his inner barriers like a knife. He had to do something to help this man whose friendship had given a purpose, a meaning to his life; he could not sit by and watch Kirk suffer, and do nothing to ease that suffering.

Yet... what could he do?

A mind-link? It was possible, yet Spock recoiled from the thought of entering Kirk's mind without permission - it was a violation of everything he had



been taught. And, he reasoned, what if Kirk wasn't strong enough to withstand the shock of the meld? In his present condition it might do more harm than good, and Spock could not bear the thought of Kirk suffering by his hand. They had come too far together for him to destroy Kirk's trust in him. He would use the meld only if it was absolutely necessary.

So... what could he do? In that moment Spock came closer to a feeling of total desperation than he had ever come in his life before. If Kirk died, he ~~he~~ did not think that he could face the long, empty years that stretched before him. He could not go back to the loneliness he had known before Kirk had extended his hand in friendship, and broken through the wall he had so carefully built around himself. He owed Jim so much - surely the Fates could not be so cruel as to deprive him of the chance to repay just a little of what Kirk had given him.

If Kirk died, there were so many things that would have to remain unsaid, and for perhaps the first time in his life Spock cursed the Vulcan upbringing which prevented him from saying the things he wanted - needed - to say.

Kirk lay quiet, the fever of the last hour seeming to have abated somewhat. Much relieved by the change, however slight, Spock leaned over to remove the cold compress which he had placed on his friend's forehead. As he did so Kirk stirred restlessly, and began to shiver uncontrollably, murmuring over and over to himself,

"C...cold... so c...cold!"

Hurriedly Spock drew up the furs in a vain attempt to warm him, but they didn't seem to help. He felt Kirk's hand - it was as cold as ice! Instantly, he made up his mind. With the merest hesitation he drew Kirk into his arms, and holding him close tried to keep him warm with the heat from his own spare frame, supporting him until the violent bout of shivering eased.

Instinctively Kirk drew closer as though even in this unconscious state he was aware of the Vulcan's presence, and derived comfort from the strong embrace.

And so Spock sat, his arms encircling the now quiet form of his Captain, as the minutes stretched into hours, with no word from McCoy or the Enterprise.

Kirk felt himself drifting on a sea of pain. No matter how hard he struggled to drag himself free of the darkness which threatened to engulf him, he felt trapped. Would this nightmare never end? Surely someone would help him. He tried to call out, but no words would come; his mouth felt dry, his throat so tight that he could hardly breathe. And all the time the darkness, that impenetrable wall of silence, closed in on him, pushing him down... down... down...

Desperately he struggled to drag himself free. It was then that he saw her. Edith! She was smiling, beckoning to him - he wanted to follow her... But something held him back. Edith was dead... wasn't she? It wasn't possible that she could be standing there in front of him, exactly as he remembered her. It just wasn't possible... was it?

Even as the thought crossed his mind, Edith faded from view, and was replaced by another figure - and another. He strained his eyes to peer into the gloom, and recognised his two best friends. He knew they'd come, he knew they'd help him. They were calling to him, shouting his name... what was he to do? Which way should he turn?

As he looked at the two friends who had come to mean so much to him, Edith reappeared. She was holding out her hand to him, silently pleading with him to go with her. Yet... if he followed Edith that path would lead to...

No! Not that... Not that! He didn't want to die!

He began to fall... deeper and deeper into the black void, and in that

moment of desperation he turned to the one person he knew could help him.

"Spock... help me... please... HELP ME!"

The quiet form, still resting in Spock's arms, suddenly began to struggle, and Kirk's entire body was gripped by a violent bout of trembling which could not be controlled.

Words, unintelligible at first, spilled forth from dry lips, culminating in a cry of such complete and utter anguish that Spock felt his defences crumbling.

"Spock... help me... please... HELP ME!"

In his delirium Kirk had called out to him for help, and such a cry could not be denied. There was only one course of action open to him : he had to use the meld.

After a moment's hesitation while he prepared himself for what was to come, Spock leaned forward, his long fingers making contact with Kirk's flushed face.

Slowly, very slowly, he began to establish the link, gently probing deeper into the blackness of his Captain's mind, and bracing himself for the onrush of pain which he knew must come. When it came, however, he was almost unprepared for such intense agony.

How Kirk must have suffered - was still suffering! Taking the pain into his own mind, he controlled it there - at least he could do that much for his friend.

Gradually, he strengthened the link. He had to give Kirk the extra strength he needed to fight for his life, for already he could feel his friend slipping away from him.

Desperately, his mind cried out, //No, you must not! I will not let you die! You have too much to live for - you cannot give up so easily. If you give in now, then you are not the James Kirk I know. I will not believe that this is the way you wish it to be. Fight, Jim... please... fight!//

At first there was nothing; then Spock felt the first faint stirrings of Kirk's mind.

//Jim!//

No response. Firmer this time.

//JIM!//

He felt a vague flash of something... recognition? Hope? He wasn't sure which.

//Jim, listen to me. You must fight - you must not give in to this feeling which threatens to overpower you - to do so means death. Do you really want to die?//

Very faintly the answer came back. //No...//

Then puzzlement. //Spock... is it really you?//

//Who else would it be?//

//We are linked?//

//Yes. Forgive me, but I had to do something to help you - this was the only way.//

//What's happened to me?//

//You have been very ill. A snake bite - it almost proved fatal. The Tamarians had no cure. If you had not possessed the strength you needed to fight...//

//You gave me that strength. I remember it so clearly now. I felt so

afraid, as though I was living in a nightmare world from which I couldn't escape. Edith was there - I could see her, almost touch her. She was calling to me, begging me to follow her. And then you appeared - and Bones - and I didn't know which way to turn. I was being forced to choose between life and death, and I knew that if I followed Edith, then I would die... and I didn't want that! I remember turning to you for help... and you came.//

//You know I always will.//

//But... why do I feel this way, as though my life has lost its meaning, its purpose?//

//You have been living under a great strain these last few weeks. With Edith's death you lost someone for whom you cared very deeply, someone to whom you were very close.//

//I let her die, Spock - I did nothing to help her. I could have...//

//In the circumstances there was nothing you could have done to save her - it was either her death, or the deaths of millions. You must stop blaming yourself, torturing yourself in this way. Although you do not believe it at this present time, the hurt will fade, I assure you of that, and only pleasant memories will remain. Always remember that you are not alone - there are others who care about you. Eventually, you will find a new purpose.//

//I think I already have, my friend.//

Then, as though he was aware of it for the first time, Kirk's mind projected another thought. //I was in a great deal of pain... but it's gone now.//

//I am controlling it.//

//You would do that... for me? But why?//

//I think you already know the answer to that question, Jim.//

Kirk was suddenly aware of an overwhelming feeling of warmth suffusing his entire being. Their thoughts flowed freely, as they took the opportunity to say all the things which had remained unsaid, the warmth of feelings which could not be expressed in words. And in that moment the bond which existed between them, for so long an unspoken part of their lives, grew and was strengthened. Nothing, and no-one, would break it.

//Spock?//

//Yes?//

//Earlier, you asked for my forgiveness. What do I have to forgive? Without your help I would have died.//

//I entered into the link without your permission, Jim, and by doing so I disobeyed the teachings of Vulcan. I may also have destroyed your trust in me.//

//You could never do that - I trust you with my life. Surely you know that?//

//I know now.//

//You did what you had to do - there is nothing to forgive. You gave me the purpose I needed to live - I won't let you down.//

Satisfied that he had done all he could, Spock felt that the time had come to break the link.

//Jim... I must withdraw now.//

He was immediately assailed by a sense of panic.

//No, Spock! Please... don't leave me.//

//Jim... you must let me go.//

//But... I'm afraid...//

//There is nothing to fear. The pain has gone - it will not return.//

//Don't leave me!//

//I will not leave you. I shall be here as long as you need me. My place will always be 'by your side'... But you must let me break the link.//

//I... All right, Spock - I'll do as you say. But, please... stay close. I... don't want to be alone again.//

//You will never be alone.//

Slowly, Spock withdrew. He felt exhausted - but at peace, and once glance at his Captain told him all he needed to know. Kirk's fever had broken, he was sleeping peacefully at last.

Spock allowed a very un-Vulcan sigh of relief to escape from his lips before relaxing for the first time in hours.

On the Enterprise the atmosphere was subdued as news of the Captain's illness spread like wildfire throughout the ship.

The laboratories were scenes of intense activity as medical personnel raced against time to find a possible antidote to the poison.

In Sickbay, McCoy leaned back in his chair, rubbing an unsteady hand across tired eyes. He heard a sound and glanced up as Christine Chapel entered the room. For a second hope flashed in the blue eyes - and quickly died when he saw the expression on her face. Sge shook her head.

"Nothing, Doctor. These are the results of the final tests - they are all negative. We've tried everything, with no success."

Completely defeated, McCoy buried his face in his hands.

Concerned, Christine said, "You're pushing yourself too hard. Why don't you try and rest? You've worked non-stop since you came back on board."

"Rest? How can I possibly rest when in a few minutes I've got to go down there and tell Spock that his best friend is going to die, and that there's nothing I can do to preevent it! Here we are, with our advanced equipment, and we can do no better than a group of savages! By failing, I've signed Jim's death warrant. And what of Spock? If Jim dies, a part of will also die down there on that planet." And what of myself? he asked silently, before adding aloud, "I've failed them, Chris; I've failed them both."

He dahsed the back of his hand across eyes which had filled with tears, and hurriedly turned away, not wishing to make a prize fool of himself in front of his head rurse.

"I'm sorry, Chris - I shouldn't have exploded like that." It was his day for apologising. "I'm not myself - the strain..."

"It's all right, Doctor - I understand. We all know^{how} you must be feeling. But you've done all you can - it's no use blaming yourself because you haven't been able to find an antidote."

"I know, but it does help to ease a little of the pain." He sighed, suddenly feeling very old, as though this failure had taken all the fight out of him. With a resigned voice he said, "Notify Scotty that I'll be beaming down in a few minutes." He patted her arm briefly. "Thanks for understanding."

Christine watched him go with a heavy heart and a worried expression on her face.

Spock had left Kirk momentarily, to stand before the open doorway, enjoying the feel of the cool evening breeze as it fanned his cheeks and helped to ease a little of his tiredness.

He turned as he heard Kirk stir behind him, and had covered the distance between them with one swift movement. He held his breath as Kirk struggled to regain consciousness. Eventually the hazel eyes flickered open, instantly alight with recognition and remembrance of all that had happened.

"Hi," he murmured sleepily.

"How do you feel, Jim?"

"As though I could sleep for a week," Kirk admitted.

"That is only to be expected. With all that you have gone through you are going to need plenty of rest."

Kirk groaned. "Don't tell McCoy that. He'll have me confined to Sickbay for days on end if he has his way." He glanced worriedly at Spock. "How do you feel?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Don't pretend, Spock - at least, not with me. I know what it cost you to do what you did. The strain..."

"I will admit to feeling a little tired - the meld was unusually long - but that does not matter... now. Now I know you will be all right."

"I haven't thanked you yet, have I? How do you say thank you to someone who has just given you back the will to live?"

"My reasons for helping you were purely selfish ones, Jim. I really thought that this time I would be too late... that this time I might lose you. I could not revert to the loneliness I knew before..."

"Spock - there's no need to explain. My friend, you know - and I know - the strength of the bond which exists between us. You said that I would never be alone again. Well, the same goes for you, too. Just remember that, okay? We need each other - don't let either of us forget it." Kirk regarded his friend steadily for a moment, before looking beyond Spock towards an unfamiliar figure who had entered without a sound.

"Forgive me, gentlemen. I do not wish to intrude, but I heard voices, and I thought... hoped..."

Spock stood up, beckoning Taseen to join him. "You are not interrupting, Taseen; on the contrary, I was about to call you." He turned to Kirk. "Captain, I would like you to meet Taseen. It was his people who found you and brought you here. They looked after you until McCoy and I arrived."

Kirk extended his hand. "I am pleased to meet you, Taseen, and to be able to thank you in person for all that you've done for my friends and me."

"It was nothing, Captain. I am so relieved that you are well again. It distressed us that such a dreadful thing should have happened to you while you were on our planet."

"Please don't blame yourself," Kirk interposed. "I am the one at fault. If I had been more careful..."

"Captain, you were a stranger to our world. You could not possibly be aware that such dangers exist on Taman."

"Well, I know now - having learned the hard way," said Kirk, somewhat ruefully. "At least this incident has taught me one thing - never to take anything at its face value." Changing the subject, he continued, "Taseen, I'd like to repay some of the kindness you've shown me. What I propose is this: if Dr. McCoy has not already done so, I will notify Starfleet Command of the position here on Taman, the dangers your people have to face every day. I am sure that if we work together someone, somewhere, will find an antidote to this poison, and help to make Taman a safe place in which to live."

"You would do that for us - complete strangers?"

"You helped to save my life, remember - you brought my friends to me. Shall we just say that I'm returning the favour?"

"This Federation of yours is indeed fortunate to have such people as you and your friends working on its behalf."

As Kirk looked puzzled, Spock hastened to explain. "Taseen has heard of the Federation, Captain."

"Yes, we have learned of its existence from the few strangers who have come to Taman."

"Have you ever considered joining the Federation?" Kirk asked.

"Us, Captain? But what could we have to offer the Federation? We are a simple people. We could never hope to compete with your people."

"You wouldn't have to 'compete', as you put it, Taseen. Taman would be accepted on its own merits. And in return, we can offer you protection, assistance. What do you say?"

"We have always been an independent people, Captain."

"I assure you, Taseen, you wouldn't lose that independence. The Federation will not attempt to change you or your way of life. Think about it, talk it over with your people, and if you do decide to join us, I would be more than happy to act as mediator between your people and my own."

"Thank you, Captain - I will, indeed, do as you ask."

"Good - that's settled, then." Kirk sank back, realising that he still felt weak, and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, he met Spock's concerned gaze.

"I'm all right, Spock - really I am." He tried to sound reassuring, but underneath he knew he couldn't fool Spock.

"Captain, I must differ with you - you are not 'all right'. You still need rest. It will only take me a minute to contact Mr. Scott and..."

Anything else which Spock might have said was interrupted by a familiar hum behind them, and they turned as a figure shimmered into view, taking on the form of Leonard McCoy.

The expression on the doctor's face as he drank in the unbelievable sight of his Captain, miraculously restored to health, was a joy to behold. He stood for several seconds, disbelief having stunned him into silence.

Kirk grinned weakly at him, perhaps guessing a little of what his friend was feeling.

"Well, don't just stand there, Bones. Say something, even if it's only 'Hello'."

"Jim... How...?" he managed to stammer at last.

"It's a long story, Bones. Remind me to tell you about it some day. Let's just say that I had a lot of help from my friend."

McCoy glanced affectionately at Spock. "I might've known you'd have something to do with it. What did you do? Meld with him, or something?"

"Precisely, Doctor," came the calm reply.

"Spock - I was only joking."

"I was not."

"You mean you seriously entered into a link with Jim, knowing the risks involved? Didn't you realise that you were endangering your own life?"

"Nonsense, Doctor. I knew what I was doing, and I was in complete control the entire time. You had left Jim in my charge - I did what I thought best."

McCoy gave up. It was time he faced up to the fact that these two friends of his would stop at nothing in their efforts to help each other, no matter how great their own personal danger.

"Thanks for what you did, Spock," he murmured gruffly, before turning away to hide his embarrassment.

Taseen motioned to Spock to join him. "You will be leaving soon?" the Tamanian asked.

Spock nodded. "As soon as we have contacted the ship - yes."

"Then I will take my leave. Please tell Captain Kirk that I will consider very carefully all that he has said. Perhaps we shall meet again?"

"I hope so, Taseen," Spock replied. "Let us hope that next time we will meet under happier circumstances."

"Indeed, Mr. Spock. Farewell."

And he was gone, leaving the three friends together.

Kirk glanced up at Spock's approach. "Has Taseen gone?"

Spock nodded.

"Pity - I'd have liked to say goodbye to him."

"I do not think he wished to disturb you, Jim - and I must say I am inclined to agree with him."

"How do you feel now, Jim?" McCoy asked. "Do you think you can stand? I won't be happy until I get you safely back on board the Enterprise."

Before Kirk could answer, Spock interposed, "That will not be necessary, Doctor. I shall carry him."

"Don't be ridiculous, Spock. I'm fine, really I am," Kirk interrupted hurriedly. "Besides, what will the crew think if they see me being carried on board?"

"The crew will be too pleased to have their Captain back to be bothered about anything else," McCoy said. "Spock is right."

"Bones?" Kirk was stunned by this turn of events. "I never thought I'd see the day when you actually agreed with Spock over anything!"

If he expected a teasing reply, Kirk was disappointed. McCoy was serious as he replied, "There's been a lot of water under the bridge since then - Spock and I understand each other a little better now, don't we, Spock?"

"Indeed, Doctor," Spock replied quietly, before flipping open his communicator.

"Spock to Enterprise."

"Enterprise here."

"Three to beam up, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, Mr. Spock - it'll be a pleasure." Scotty had been waiting for such an order.

Before Kirk could protest further, Spock bent down and scooped him up in his arms.

"Really, Spock - I feel so ridiculous," Kirk murmured drowsily. Seconds later he was asleep, his head resting on Spock's shoulder.

"At last!" grinned McCoy. "Now perhaps we'll get some peace."

Spock's answer was lost as the shimmer of the transporter effect claimed them and took them home.

KOLINAHHR by Gillian Catchpole

Vision of Earth

Hung in space all blue and white,
 His last view of a world he would never see again.
 The strength of his Vulcan blood would eradicate every emotion,
 Relieving him forever of his pain.
 Stopping on a ledge
 He turned into the wind, his cloak lifting and flapping.
 He looked back at the way he had come -
 Still time to return.
 Into Jim's enveloping warmth had he gradually revealed
 All the rejection and lonely sorrow;
 For the first time he had lived not as a stranger
 But as someone who belonged.
 In time he would be born again
 Into a life that could feel nothing for his friend.
 He hesitated to gain from such an overwhelming loss,
 Yet could think of no other choice.
 He gathered up his cloak around him;
 It did not become a Vulcan
 To dwell too long on the sadness in farewells.

Solemnly he carried his pitcher of water
 Away from the shadow into the fiercest heat.
 Amidst echoes of Jim
 He placed it carefully on the chosen spot,
 Unable to compose his mind.
 His time would be long, so many undisciplined thoughts...
 Their remaining water, half for each,
 Refusing to drink till he had drunk his own,
 Illogical when sufficient for only one.

Better to die, he remembered, together,
 Than survive through the death of a friend...

Yes, his time would be long, so long... so long.
 His aching body, suffering thirst, made known its needs;
 But his dominant mind, sunk in the swirling mists of contemplation,
 Saw not the blazing sky from light to dark,
 Nor felt through ragged clothes the chill wind biting.
 Immovable as the rocks,
 On kneeling limbs the wind-blown sand began to settle,
 Eddying round and round the untouched water.

He could hear the gong and the shaking bells,
 Feel all his blood raging as he reached for the throat,
 Squeezing tighter and tighter and harder and harder
 Till he cried out with an agonised "No!" that released his mind,
 Thankful that in the privacy of his room
 None could see his trembling.
 The following day, when he was calm,
 He sought out the solitude of the highest level.
 He drifted his mind along the rocks,
 Sensitive to every weathered furrow and indentation.
 He became the land.
 Rising, he was his suns, burning and aflame;
 He could see himself far below, their child,
 A Vulcan-born,
 Within whom all Earthly passions would wither away
 Like weeds sprouting on stony ground,
 Possessing no roots.
 He could feel the limp body within his hands;
 He had pleaded for his life, could have done no more...
 All deaths were regrettable, but Challenge was accepted...
